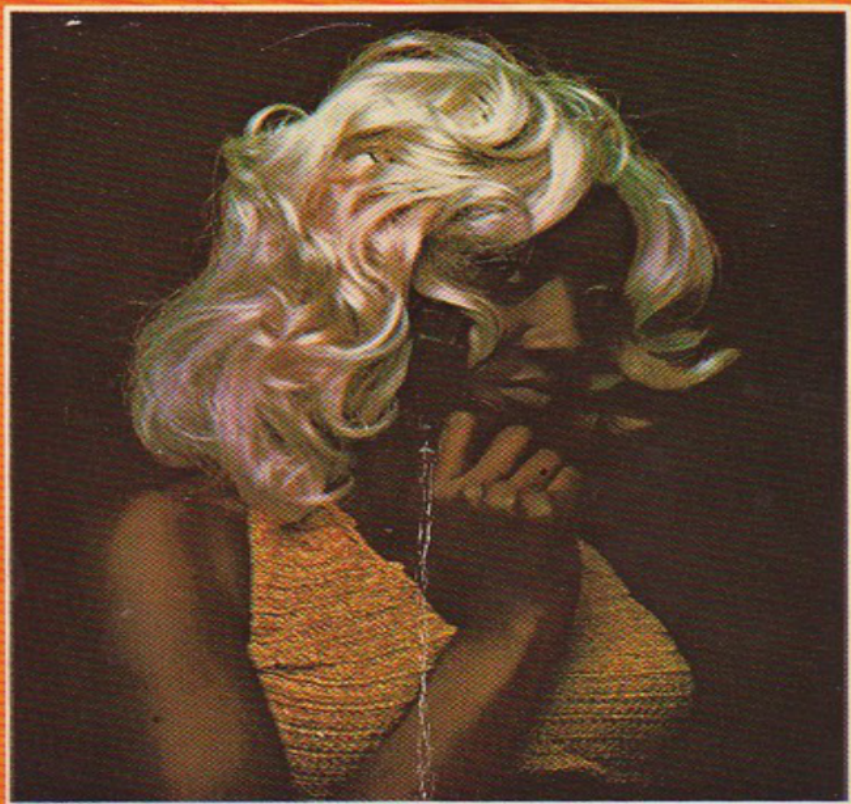




NICK CARTER

A KILLMASTER
SPY CHILLER



THE DEVIL'S COCKPIT

The Devil's Cockpit (1967)
(Book 23 in the Killmaster series)
Version 0.9

Chapter 1

FORTY FLOORS above the cacophony of Broadway, the big man stirred in the bed. A look at a small golden clock on the bedside table told him it was a few minutes after ten. It was a bright, blue, shiny day beyond the velvet drapes of the penthouse, a late September day that bore the first faint harbinger of autumnal chill. The year 1966 was rounding the turn into the stretch, with the world still balanced on the razor's edge of destruction.

The man in the bed was Nick Carter, senior-ranking Killmaster for AXE, and it was he, as much as any single man alive, who had thus far managed to keep the planet in one piece. Not that Nick ever thought of it in that way, if indeed he thought of it at all. He was given certain jobs to do. He did them. If, in the doing, as Housman put it, he "saved the sum of things," it was quite incidental.

There was a sharp rap on the bedroom door. The matt in the bed came fully and instantly awake.

"Who is it?"

"Is me, Missa Nick. Pok. Is coffee time."

Nick's grin was rueful. He still had not quite gotten: used to having a houseboy—a luxury he had never allowed himself before. Pok was sixteen, a Korean war orphan who had never known a home. Nick's last mission had been in Korea. Q.E.D. Or something. Nick still was not exactly sure how he had become a foster father. But he had—he had pulled strings and cut red tape—and so here was Pok with coffee.

Nick yawned mightily. He started to stretch, then thought better of it. He was just back from Nhatrang, in. South Vietnam, where he had undergone a survival course with the elite of the Green Berets. He had a million aches, every muscle hurt, and jungle rot festered on his back.

"Come in." He pushed his hand beneath the pillow and felt the cold butt of the Luger, and made sure that it was out of sight. Pok knew nothing of Nick's real profession. To the boy he was just a rich American with a heart.

Pok placed the bed tray over Nick's flat belly. There was orange juice, steaming coffee, as black as Satan's dreams, the hard poppy-seed rolls that Nick liked, and plenty of butter.

Pok took a step back and bowed slightly. "Good morning, sar. Is lovely sun today. Nice for my first time go to American school, I think."

Nick smiled at the boy. He sipped coffee, buttered a roll. "That's right. This is the big day—just remember what I told you: Be polite and don't get into any brawls with the tough kids."

Pok's perfect teeth flashed in an uncomprehending smile. "Tough kids, sar? I do not understand."

"You will," Nick murmured, "Oh, you will. But skip it for now. Any phone calls this morning?"

Pok's smile widened. "Yis. Three ladies call. I say you tired, sleep hard, I not wake."

Nick nodded. "They have names, those ladies?"

"Yis. I write down on pad in kitchen. You want?"

Nick sipped coffee. He yawned again. "Not now. I'll look at them later. Get that tube of yellow guck from the bathroom, Pok, and fix my back. I'll be finished here in a minute."

As Pok was spreading the foul-smelling yellow salve on a half-dozen plaques of jungle rot, the AXE agent's mind flashed back to the week he had just spent in South Vietnam. It had been rugged, as rugged as anything he had ever experienced. Nick grimaced as the sour tang of the salve filled his nostrils. He smelled like a pharmacy.

Just what, he wondered now, had been in David Hawk's devious old brain when he had condemned Nick to that week in hell? And just after Nick had returned from his yearly refresher course at PURG, AXE's own version of a training hell. He had, as always, worked like the devil, at PURG—it got a little tougher every year—but he had graduated at the head of his class. Then, just when he was ready for a week of champagne and wenches, Delia Stokes had called to say his orders were being cut for South Vietnam.

He had bellowed a little—but to no avail. He had seen Hawk for a few minutes, trying to sweet-talk his way out of it. Lot of good that had been! His chief had eyes like flint and a mouth like a wolf trap, plus a gift for gentle malice.

"You're not a kid any longer," Hawk had said. "And the older you get the tougher it gets. You know that as well as I do. So the more you have to prove yourself ..."

Nick had said that he had just goddamned well proved himself. He had come out of PURG—short for Purgatory—at the head of his class. And PURG was the toughest training school in the world.

"Not quite," Hawk had said. "Not any more." He had smiled at Nick in the thin-lipped manner that could infuriate the AXE agent to the point where, at times, he forgot that Hawk was nearly a father to him.

"The Green Beret people have come up with a new one," Hawk had continued. "They call it a Recondo School—that's a contraction of reconnaissance and commando. They tell me it's rougher than a cob."

Hawk had taken a chewed, unlit cigar from his mouth, had looked at it in disgust, and then had tossed it into a wastebasket. He had yanked the wrapper off a fresh cigar and had pointed it at Nick like a

rapier. "The curriculum of this Recondo School stresses stealth, watchfulness, and survival in the midst of the enemy. Surely,"—and here Nick had detected a note of smugness, or was it amusement?—"surely, you will admit that those qualities are essentials that every AXE agent must possess?"

Nick had opened his mouth, then he had closed it. He had been about to retort that since he was still alive after dozens of missions—that since he was at that moment walking and talking and breathing—he must already possess more than a smattering of know-how in this deadly and dirty business. But Nick had said none of those things. He had known by then that he was going to South Vietnam—for a certain and specific reason. Hawk always had a reason. But Hawk was not going to tell Nick the reason until he was damned good and ready.

"I think you'll find it interesting," Hawk had smiled sourly. "They've worked out a new gimmick: pop-up targets that shoot back at you."

Nick had stared at his boss coldly. "Just how is that done?"

"Simply," said Hawk. "They form teams of half a dozen men. Then they fly you over and drop you right in the middle of a Vietcong hideout. Grading in the course is also very simple. If you survive—if you get back—you pass the course. Good luck, son. Delia will give you your orders."

Now, as Pok stuck the last square of gauze on Nick's back with tape, the AXEman had to admit that Hawk had not kidded him. After three days of intensive training, Nick and five other men had been dropped near Vungtau, in a morass of delta swamps and paddies where the VC was trying to mine the channel from the South China Sea to Saigon.

Two of them had made it back: Nick and a Sergeant Benson.

Nick rolled out of bed and patted Pok's sleek, dark head. "Okay, kid. Thanks. Soon as you finish your chores you're on your own. You got everything? Keys? Money? Books? Your clothes all right?"

"Got all," said Pok. "Everything number one. I go school half day for first week, get oleintated. You like new clothes, Missa Nick?"

Nick repressed a shudder and nodded. "That's not important. Do you like 'em? You have to wear them." He had turned Pok loose in the boys' department of the best store in town and, if the pants were too tight, the coat too long and the shoes too narrow and high-heeled—well, the kid had to wear them!

"I like," said Pok. "I like number one. First new clothes I ever have."

"Then it's okay," said Nick. "Bring me that list of ladies now."

Relaxing in the bathroom, smoking a cigarette, he studied the bit of paper with Pok's torturous scrawl.

Gabriel Morrow—it was Gabrielle, and Nick was supposed to go to an art show with her that afternoon. She was an exuberant redhead with a slim, lovely body, a body that beckoned and taunted and teased—a body that she had not yet given to Nick Carter. Nick sighed, then smiled. Promises—promises. But they would be kept. Perhaps that very night.

Flaw Vorhis—that translated into Florence Vorhees. Nick frowned. He did not like to be pursued. He liked to do the pursuing. But the Vorhees woman was persistent. Give her that. Nick forgot her.

Derra Stok—that one baffled him for a moment. But only for a moment. Delia Stokes! Hawk's private secre-tary. Hell's bells!

Ten seconds later, Nick was picking up the red phone in his study. It was a direct line to AXE Headquarters in Washington and had a scrambler attachment.

Seconds later, Delia Stokes said: "He wants to talk to you, Nick. Hold on a sec."

Hawk came on, his voice graveling around a cigar. "How are you, N3? Recuperated from your ardors in the jungle, I trust."

Nick grinned at the phone. Sly old bastard, he thought affectionately. Sends me on a make-or-break mission, on a survive-or-die detail, then acts like I'm just back from a Boy Scout hike.

"I don't think," he told his boss, "that ardors is the word you want, sir. There weren't any. If there were any women in that swamp they were shooting at me. Everybody was shooting at me. They all missed but one. I got a fanny crease. It's healed now. So, aside from aching in every bone and muscle, and rotting away with jungle crud, I'm in fine shape. Did you have anything in mind, sir?"

Hawk chuckled. "I do. I do indeed. Could you possibly get down here this afternoon, N3? Can you tear yourself away from that wicked city long enough to come in and discuss a little business?"

More to needle Hawk than anything else, he said, "I do have a date, sir. I was going to an art gallery. The culture bit, you know. I hate to disappoint—"

Hawk's laugh was harsh and unamused. "You could do with a bit of culture, but you'll have to tell your lady you'll see her some other time. An AXE plane is waiting for you in Newark now. I just set it up. Get on it."

"Yes, sir. But I'm afraid I won't smell very good, sir."

There was a little silence. Then: "You won't what?"

"Smell very good, sir. It's the salve they gave me for the jungle rot, you see. It smells pretty bad. Awful, in fact."

"Forget it," said Hawk. "Where you're going they won't mind your smell. Snap to it, son."

Three hours later, Nick Carter was facing Hawk in the latter's

untidy little office in Washington. Nick had called Gabrielle to break his date, left a note for Pok, and taken a taxi to Newark. All in an hour. Now he tried to relax in one of Hawk's uncomfortable chairs, without much success, and lit one of his long, gold-tipped cigarettes.

Hawk had made a little tower with his fingers and was staring at Nick, over the steeple, in rather an odd way. He said: "You know, son, that stuff does smell bad."

Nick waved smoke from his cigarette. "Light that stogie, then, instead of gumming it. It will help. But how about getting to it, sir? You didn't call me down here to discuss my odor. I'm supposed to be on leave, you know."

Hawk lit the cigar and expelled goutts of evil-smelling gray smoke. "I know. Your leave is cancelled, as of now. Don't be impatient—we have to wait for someone—a Mr. Glenn Boynton. He's our current liaison man with CIA Should be here any minute now."

Nick let his flash of irritation show. "The CIA again! What sort of jam are they in now—that they want us to get them out of?"

Hawk regarded his Number One boy with cold eyes. "That's lousy English, you know. Using a preposition to end a sentence with." Hawk chortled dryly at his own bad joke.

Nick stared at his chief for a moment, then looked away. An old-fashioned Western Union clock on a puce-colored wall said that it was a minute to one. He crossed his long legs and swung one expensively shod foot impatiently. He dribbled ashes on the drab, well-worn linoleum.

After a long minute of silence, pointed up by the tick of the clock, Nick said: "It's something pretty nasty, isn't it, sir?"

It always was when Hawk sought to relieve his own tension by cracking bad jokes and indulging in aimless word play.

Hawk nodded. "Yes, boy. Pretty nasty. When Boyntoa gets here he's going to show you something. I think it will chill even your blood. I know it did mine. After I saw it I went to the john and threw up."

Nick Carter asked no more questions. Anything that could produce such a reaction in Hawk had to be bad. Formidable. Nasty beyond the ordinary gutter filth he had become accustomed to in this profession.

There was a rap on the door. Hawk said, "Come in."

The man who entered was big and running to fat. He had two chins and his sparse hair was gray around a tonsure. The fatty bags beneath his eyes were dark brown. His suit, well cut to hide a paunch, was rumpled and bagging on him. He wore a well-starched clean white shirt that did nothing to enhance his appearance. He looked like a man who had been going for seventy-two hours or more, with only time out to change his shirt and perhaps take a shower. Nick knew the

feeling.

Hawk introduced them. Nick stood up to shake hands. Boynton's hand was flaccid and clammy.

The CIA man looked at Hawk. "How much have you told him?"

Hawk shook his head. "Nothing yet. I thought he should see it for himself first. You got it with you?"

"I've got it," said Boynton. He reached into his coat pocket and brought out a small cardboard box. It was square, about four inches by four and perhaps two inches deep.

Boynton handed the box to Nick. "Take a look, Carter. It's all that's left of a damned good agent. One of our men."

Killmaster took the box. He removed the cover and stared down at what lay limned darkly against white cotton. "His stomach churned. For an instant he thought he was going to vomit, as Hawk had, but he managed to restrain it. His instincts had been right. Hawk had been right. It was nasty.

The little box contained the shriveled genitals of a human. Tiny, shrunken little eggs. All that was left of a man.

David Hawk, watching Nick closely, saw the muscles set and quiver in the lean jaw. That was all. Hawk knew it was enough, knew he had chosen the right man for this job. A man who would pursue, avenge, and destroy.

Nick Carter fought down the hot scald of rage that rose in his throat. His face was impassive as he handed the box back to Boynton.

"Maybe you had better tell me all about it," Killmaster said quietly. "I would like to get started on this one as soon as possible."

Chapter 2

THE CIA MAN put the box back in his pocket. Nick wondered what in the hell they would do with a thing like that? What could you do?

Boynton read his thoughts. "We're going to cremate it. Then we'll give it to his widow, along with a few wood ashes to make weight, and a few white lies. She'll never know what really happened to her husband."

Nick flicked his lighter and held it to a cigarette, "What really did?"

"Not now," said Hawk. "Not yet, Boynton. I want him to see the movie first. The movie and the other stuff. By that time the Brain Boys will have finished running everything through their computers. They'll have a synthesis ready for us and we can come back and kick it around. Okay?"

Boynton nodded. "Okay. You're right, of course. Much better to feed it to him gradually, so he gets the whole picture in the proper sequence. So let's get on with it—if I don't get some sleep soon I'll die on my feet."

A self-service elevator took them down to the basement level. They had their credentials checked by an armed guard and were given lapel badges. A second armed guard escorted them down in yet another elevator to one of the many sub-basements.

The guard led them through a labyrinth of corridors to a tall steel door. A sign on the door read: Projection Room. Above the door was a red and green light bulb. The green light was glowing.

The long, narrow room was well illuminated by ceiling chandeliers. The seats, fifty of them, were of the regular theater type and uncushioned. Nick Carter had been in this room many times. Always it reminded him of the neighborhood movie he had spent so many happy hours in as a boy. The Bijou. Every little town in those days had had a Bijou.

There was a man in an end seat about halfway down the room. He arose now and came toward them. He was tall, with a little dark moustache and curly black hair, and his clothes were exquisitely cut on a slim frame. Nick thought there was something vaguely familiar about the man's face.

When Hawk introduced him, Nick understood why the face was familiar. He had seen it in magazines and newspapers many times. The man was a famous movie director.

"This is Preston Mohr," Hawk said. "He's come all the way from Hollywood to help us on this thing."

Nick and Mohr shook hands. Hawk said: "You've already seen the film, Mr. Mohr?"

The director nodded. "Yes. Just finished. It really isn't a bad piece of work, technically speaking—forgetting the content, of course." A bleak smile touched Mohr's face. "But then the content is the really important thing, isn't it!"

Glenn Boynton had slumped into a seat, his big shoulders bowed in fatigue. His eyes were closed. Without opening them he said, "Can't we get on with it?"

Hawk made a signal to the projectionist at the rear of the room. To Nick he said, "Just watch the film. Don't talk. Don't ask any questions. Mr. Mohr here is the only one that is to talk. From time to time he'll try to clarify things for us. Listen carefully to what he says. Okay, let's go."

The ceiling lights faded. The wide screen remained dark for a moment, then leaped into a blinding white rectangle of nothing. Blank. Then black letters and numbers, code symbols from AXE's own labs, flashed on. Then the credits.

The colophon was a huge dragon spitting fire, the great tail lashing, the fangs menacing the audience. Superimposed, in flickering letters of fire, unwinding as from a scroll, came the words: Dragon Pictures Presents—SHAME OF THE GANGSTERS.

At his side Preston Mohr said: "The titles and lead-in are rather primitive. I doubt that Blackstone had anything to do with them. Probably done separately."

Blackstone? Nick shrugged mentally. Never heard of the man.

The film was in color. After an establishing shot of an American prison—a subtitle stated that the most desperate criminals, murderers and sex perverts were confined therein—the camera moved in to show a riot in progress. Prisoners were being brutally beaten and machine-gunned. Bodies of guards lay everywhere in pools of blood.

The camera cut to another area of the prison. The women's quarters. A subtitle said: American female gangsters are as brutal and perverted as the men.

A little group of female prisoners were attacking a buxom woman guard. They swarmed over the helpless guard, kicking and beating and stabbing. The camera cut sharply away to show two young women in a cell. They were half-dressed and were fondling and embracing each other. The older woman, in a language that Nick guessed was Malay, said: "Let those other fools fight. We will keep to ourselves and make love."

The camera swung back to the rioting women. Most of the female prisoners had drawn away from the nearly dead guard, but one prisoner remained straddling the inert body. She was brandishing a

long knife. The camera moved in for a close-up of the prisoner. Her face filled the screen. She was a beautiful woman. Or would have been, in repose. On the screen now, she looked like Medusa gone mad, the dark hair straggling wildly around the livid features, the face stained with blood, the teeth glinting like shark's teeth behind a red wound of mouth.

The knife plunged down. In close-up. The guard's throat was ripped from side to side and great gouts of blood rolled from the raw wound. The woman stood over her victim and brandished the bloody weapon. Her prison clothes had been torn and ripped away to reveal a lush white body. Again the camera came zooming in to show her face in close-up. This time Nick Carter got it. Never mind Hawk's caution. Nick could not restrain himself.

"For God's sake!" said Nick. "That's Mona Manning!"

From the corner of his eye Nick saw Hawk signal with a hand. The projector stopped whirring. The face of the actress, huge in close-up, remained frozen on the screen.

Preston Mohr said: "Yes, Mr. Carter. It's Mona Manning. I hope, for your peace of mind, that you're not a fan of hers."

Killmaster was in no sense a movie fan. He said as much now. "But I did see her on the Late Show not long ago. She was pretty good." He studied the frozen image on the screen. "It wasn't such an old picture, come to think of it. And she didn't look very old."

"Mona is in her mid-forties," said Preston Mohr. "She made her last Hollywood picture about five years ago. Since then I believe she's done a couple in England and one in Spain. And these things—

Hawk leaned toward Nick. "Take a good look at her, boy. You may be seeing her soon. Now let's get on with it. There's a lot to see yet." He signaled the projectionist again.

As the film began to move once more Preston Mohr said: "One thing you should know, Mr. Carter, that will help you understand this a little better. Mona Manning has been insane for years!"

The picture ran a little over an hour. The plot was simple enough. After the prison riots were put down the ringleaders were tried and sentenced to death in the electric chair. There were three of them—the woman, portrayed by Mona Manning, and two gorilla-faced men.

As the time of execution approached, the scene shifted to Washington. Newsreel shots. Interior shots showed a harried conference of high officials of the CIA. Nick grinned a little at that, and shot a look over his shoulder at Boynton. The CIA man was slumped low in his seat, his chin on his chest. A gentle snore wafted to Nick. Boynton must have seen the film a dozen times.

More details emerged. The CIA was hard up for good agents to work behind the Iron and Bamboo Curtains. They had lost a great

many agents. Those who were not killed in the line of duty were well, even gently, treated. They were kept in spotless modern prisons. Many of the CIA agents begged to be allowed to defect, to remain with their captors and share in the brave new world that was arising in spite of the criminal gangsters of the United States.

The top brass of the CIA, most of whom were depicted as effeminates who liked boys, came up with a smashing idea: Use prisoners, condemned criminals, to replace the lost agents!

It was done. The two men and the woman were snatched from the electric chair, given brief instructions and weapons, and dropped behind the Iron Curtain on an espionage mission. Here, the plot wavered, became a little vague, and Nick could not quite understand what was going on. It did not matter. The three American criminals, now working for the CIA, were loose behind the Iron Curtain. The reign of terror had begun.

The trio of Americans committed every hideous crime in the book. They murdered gentle old ladies in cold blood. They broke little children's legs with iron bars. They poisoned whole families. They captured a brave soldier, drenched him with gasoline, and burned him alive.

But it was the pornographic scenes that Nick found most interesting and—he could not deny it—exciting. He could feel his loins stirring as he watched, and it took all his concentration not to succumb to the blatant sexual orgies being enacted on the screen.

The sex scenes were skillfully handled and the technique was simple. They began where an ordinary movie left off. In a conventional movie the lovers—always a man and a woman—would kiss and perhaps walk into the bedroom. Fade-out.

Not so in Dragon Pictures. The camera moved into the bedroom with them. Every word, every lubricious wriggle and slither was recorded on film. First in duo, then in trio, every sexual exchange was tried, every erotic permutation explored. The three American agents, on vacation from spying and killing, were having themselves a sexual ball. And the ball was kept rolling by liberal doses of pot and heroin. The Americans, in addition to being sex maniacs, were addicts as well.

As Killmaster watched Mona Manning bestowing a very special and private kiss on one of the male spies, while the other man watched and cooked up a shot of heroin, he felt excitement leave him to be replaced by a growing sickness. There was something loathsome here, something, in seeing a famous motion-picture star so degrade herself, that was obscene beyond the intended surface obscenity. It was rather like entering a brothel and finding the girl next door, Nick thought with a grimace.

In the end, the three Americans were caught and condemned to

death. But a merciful Peoples' Court intervened. The two men were given life sentences—to be served in clean, model prisons and with every chance to rehabilitate themselves. The girl, Mona Manning, was treated with even more tenderness. She was not, the dialogue implied, really to blame. Her addiction was responsible, and that had been forced on her by the men and by the even more monstrous CIA.

The final scene was a Victory parade, with thousands of robust, moral, clean-living peasants, carrying banners and singing a rousing song that Killmaster recognized as a steal from The Battle Hymn of the Republic.

The lights came on with a blinding glare. Nick looked at Hawk. The old man looked gaunt and tired. And mad. He fixed his Number One Boy with a glittering mariner's eye and said, "Well?"

For one of the very few times in his life, Nick had no ready reply. He stared back at his boss and said: "Whew!"

Oddly enough, the reply seemed to satisfy Hawk, who nodded and said, "Whew indeed, son." He added, in a tone of cold ferocity: "Those dirty, lousy, filthy sons of bitches!"

Behind them Glenn Boynton said, "I've seen the damned thing five times now. I don't think I could live through a sixth. And I need a drink. Badly. Anyone got any ideas?"

Hawk stood up. "My office. All of you. I'll treat. We've got quite a session ahead of us."

Back in his office, the old man broke out bottles of bourbon and Scotch and sent out for ice, water, and two more glasses. This was, Nick thought as he tilted Scotch into his glass, definitely a first Hawk had never offered him a drink before. He noted that his chief's glass was nearly half-filled with bourbon. That in itself was unusual. Ordinarily, Hawk was not much of a drinker.

When they were all settled, Hawk put his glass on his desk, jammed a cigar into his tight old mouth, and nodded at Glenn Boynton. "Okay, Glenn, you start. Fill Carter in as much as you can. Then you can go home and get to bed before you die on me."

The fat CIA man rubbed his bloodshot eyes. He looked at Nick and tapped his pocket where he had put the little cardboard box. "You saw it. You'll remember it."

Nick fervently assented. "Yes, I'll never forget it."

"Okay. His name isn't important. Not now. But he was a good man and he was on to something. Something or someone. For nearly a year now we've been trying to find out where those filthy pictures are made."

Killmaster was surprised and showed it. "You mean not in China? I would have thought—"

Boynton's smile was weak. "So did we—at first. We wasted a lot of

time, and lost some good men, trying to run down the source in China. Or elsewhere in the Orient—Hong Kong, Korea, Indonesia. No soap. They wanted us to think that, to go wild-goose chasing all over the place. And for a long time we did. Then we captured enough of the films to give our experts a chance. They figured it out from the exteriors. The bastards are pretty cagey, but even so, they slipped up. Some of the exteriors show buildings, parks, statues, that our men could identify. Those films are being made in Europe. In Hungary. In and around Budapest.”

Nick tapped cigarette ash on Hawk’s linoleum. “The Russians? I’m a little disappointed in Ivan. I would have thought they were beyond such crudity these days. Years ago, yes, but the Russkys are pretty damned sophisticated now and—”

“Not the Russians,” said Boynton. “The Chinese. The Chicoms. It’s their operation, all right. Every sign points to it. Their gold is paying for it. You know the old cliché about the Chinese being clever—well, in this instance they are. That dirty trash is being ground out behind the Iron Curtain instead of the Bamboo Curtain.”

Boynton took a pull of his drink and rubbed his forehead with stubby fingers. “This one has been a bastard, Carter. In lots of ways. We’ve even come to doubt that the Hungarians, or the Russians, know that the operation is being run behind their frontiers. They must know about the pictures, of course. Half the world does. But they could be as puzzled as we were about where the pictures are actually made.”

“That’s a possible angle for exploitation,” Nick said. “If the Red Chinese are running a smut factory behind the Iron Curtain, without the locals knowing it, then maybe we better try to zero the locals in on matters. Could be they’d do our work for us. The two aren’t exactly buddy-buddy these days.”

Hawk interrupted for the first time. “We thought of that. Or they did.” He jerked his chin at Boynton. “Only it’s not as promising as it looks. For one thing it would take too long. Too many angles, too much to go wrong. Most important thing—maybe the Russians, or the Hungarians, wouldn’t like the idea of the Chinese running this deal behind their backs. But maybe they wouldn’t stop it, either. In a way those films are grinding the Russian axe, Maybe,” —Hawk’s grin was hard—“maybe all they would do is start charging the Chicoms a big rent. No. We can’t depend on anyone else to pull our chestnuts out of the fire. We’ve decided that this is a pursuit job, a find-and-destroy mission, and the CIA has called us in. From now on, it’s our baby. Right, Glenn?”

“Right.” Boynton tapped his pocket again and Killmaster could not refrain from an inward wince: All that was left of a good man!

“He,” said Glenn Boynton, “was the only one of five agents we sent

in who came out—and who came up with a lead. He called me from London the night he was killed. I think—in fact I’m sure of it—that he was killed before he could finish talking to me. Either killed or knocked out or kidnapped—something like that—then murdered later.”

Again Boynton tapped the little box in his pocket. “This came a couple of days after I talked to him. From London. Registered and special delivery. No note. Nothing. Just—just what you saw. Plain enough, of course. Our man was getting too close. Lay off.”

Killmaster nodded, “It has the Chinese touch, all right.”

Hawk swore. “The whole operation has the Chinese touch. Imagination and infinite patience. The concept that time is on their side. They’re pushing this smut the same way they push heroin and cocaine, on the theory that every little bit helps. Every time they can get a kid, or an adult, anywhere in the world, to look at their filth, and buy it, that person is a little more depraved than he was, a little weaker morally and that much easier handled and just a little more susceptible to propaganda.”

“The propaganda,” Nick said, “is pretty damned obvious, maybe too obvious: That all Americans are villains, perverts and degenerates. That film—well, it was too much!”

“That film wasn’t intended to be shown at Radio. City Music Hall, Carter!” Glenn Boynton said angrily. He pointed a pudgy finger at Nick. “We know it’s a lot of crap, but what we know doesn’t matter a damn. That stuff is slanted at millions of poor, ignorant bastards who never get enough to eat—and automatically hate us because we do. Most of them are illiterate. So the Chicoms give it to them in pictures that anyone can understand. Another old Chinese saying: One picture is worth a thousand words! And every picture is slow poison working against us. Believe it? You’re damned right they believe it—millions of poor peasants all around the world believe it. And a dozen of those films, like the one you just saw, are showing all over the Orient right this minute. Not to mention the filthy stuff they pour into this country!”

Boynton’s voice broke. He finished his drink and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. There was a small, uneasy silence in the room. Nick glanced at the movie director, Preston Mohr, who had been sitting quietly in a corner, nursing his drink. Mohr met Nick’s glance, then shook his head almost imperceptibly. Nick had wondered briefly about Preston Mohr’s status in all this.

Boynton said: “I’m sorry, Carter. I didn’t mean to jump down your throat. My nerves are in a hell of a state.” He looked askance at Hawk. “Okay if I take off now? You can fill him in on the rest.”

“Sure,” Hawk agreed. “Take off. Go home and sleep for a week.”

Glenn Boynton took the cardboard box from his pocket and stared down at it for a moment. "I can't sleep yet," he said. "Not just yet. I've got this to take care of first. I've got to see the widow, too."

Boynton put the box back in his pocket. He shook hands with Nick and Preston Mohr, nodded to Hawk, and left the room.

When the door closed behind the CIA man, Hawk said softly: "The agent who got killed in London was his best friend. They grew up together. Right now, Boynton is in a pretty bad way. He'll be all right, I think, but I wish he wouldn't carry that box around like some sort of a talisman. Not very professional."

You had to know David Hawk very well indeed, Nick considered, to gauge that last remark correctly. His boss was not a heartless man. He was dry, but not cold. But he was, every sparse inch of him, a professional. That said it all.

Preston Mohr helped himself to another drink, then took Boynton's vacated chair. "I'd like to get on with it, sir," he said to Hawk. "I'm catching a plane back to Hollywood, and I'm cutting it a bit thin as it is."

Again Killmaster wondered just who Preston Mohr was—apart from being a famous director. It was very unusual for Hawk to allow an outsider to sit in on an important high-level conference. Then Nick chided himself for fuzzy thinking. The answer was simple: Mohr was not an outsider.

The director was stuffing a pipe. He lit it, then pointed the stem at Nick. "I'll give you the facts on Mona Manning first, as I know them. There's not too much, really, because the secret of her insanity has been one of the best-kept secrets in Hollywood for years."

Nick turned to Hawk. "Okay if I question as we go along, sir? Faster that way, and if Mr. Mohr has to catch a plane—"

Mohr glanced at a couple of thousand dollars' worth of wristwatch. "I do," he said. "Oh, I do, indeed. The little lady won't wait—not even for me."

Hawk's thin mouth, with the cross-hatched wrinkles around the corners, cracked in a grin. He managed to cover it. He nodded to Nick. "Play Twenty Questions if you want to, but get with it."

Nick leaned toward Mohr. "How long has Mona Manning been insane?"

Mohr brushed his moustache with the tip of his little 'finger. "Nearly twenty years. I directed her in a picture about ten or twelve years ago and she was gone then, a candidate for the yo-yo academy. Not always, you must understand. Her spells came and went. At least, in those days. I should think, that she's probably way-out by now."

'Killmaster let his skepticism show. "And it was kept a secret all this time?"

Mohr nodded. "It's still a secret to the general public. The Hollywood moguls spent a hell of a lot of money and brain power to keep it that way. Mona was very big box-office, as you may remember, worth millions to the studio. They really sweated to keep the secret. Whenever she had to go into a sanitarium, as she sometimes did, it was always for alcoholism or a mild nervous breakdown." Mohr's white teeth flashed below the moustache. "They were very clever, really. They chose the lesser of two evils. Better to have Mona known as a drunk—or even a neurotic—than an outright nut. Only a very few people knew the truth. Even I wouldn't have known if I hadn't worked with her. In my job you often notice things that an ordinary observer wouldn't spot. On the set, some things become pretty obvious, even to a layman." Mohr fumbled in his pocket and brought out a gold lighter. He held it upside down over his pipe.

Nick caught the hint of self-deprecation and recognized it instantly for what it was: Instinctive protective coloration. He had had no preconceived ideas about Preston Mohr, so he did not have to revise now, but he began to understand. Mohr might well be a member of AXE.

"How did Mona Manning happen to drift behind the Curtain?" he asked.

Mohr tapped his teeth with his pipe stem. "My candid opinion, for which absolutely no one has asked, is that she was kidnapped. I told you that she made her last Hollywood picture about five years ago?"

Nick nodded.

"Then she went to England and made a couple. I guess it was getting to be too hard to keep her secret in Hollywood. Anyway, Mona was getting on in years by then, and her box-office had fallen off. Then she made a picture in Spain. After that, nothing—until those dirties began to appear all over the world. I understand that Mona hasn't been in all of them, though."

"The last six," Hawk said. "Those bastards know a good thing when they get it."

"They do indeed," agreed Mohr. "Mona was very lovely. Still is, for that matter. I was half in love with her myself for a time—until I found out the truth. Then my love turned to pity. But her impact in those dirties must be terrific all over the world. For years she was worshiped as the ideal American girl, a symbol of purity. Now they see her doing those filthy things—"

Nick lit a cigarette and finished his drink. He did not refill his glass. "You say she was kidnapped, Mohr? Couldn't she have been recruited—and gone willingly?"

Preston Mohr had light-gray eyes. They were narrowed now and

alive with intelligence as he studied Nick Carter.

"I think it was very likely a combination of the two," he said at last. "Perhaps they gave Mona a choice of some sort. Anyway, she went behind the Curtain a couple of years ago. She had been in Vienna, on tour—some sort of cabaret act she'd worked up—and all of a sudden she wasn't there."

There was a sibilance of papers as Hawk riffled through a sheaf of flimsies on his desk. He studied one for a moment, then nodded at Mohr.

"Mona Manning disappeared on October eighth, 1964, according to the State Department."

"I expect it was Mike Blackstone who set it up," said Mohr. "He may even have gone to Vienna to talk to Mona, to coax her to come over. Or he may have set up the kidnapping. Mike knew all about Mona, you see, knew she was insane. They were lovers at one time, in Hollywood."

"You mentioned Blackstone in the projection room," said Nick. "Who is he?"

Hawk made a sound that was half disgust, half triumph. "You youngsters! Michael Blackstone was, maybe still is, one of the great movie directors of all time."

Nick grinned at his boss. He was not abashed. No man knows everything—every man has his lacunae, gaps in information.

Preston Mohr said: "It's 'was,' I'm afraid. He's ruined now. But he was great. I started under Mike, as a young assistant. That's how I know that he and Mona were having an affair."

Killmaster recrossed his long legs and lit another gold-tipped cigarette. "Tell me all about this Michael Blackstone. He's directing these dirty pictures?"

"I'll stake my own professional reputation on that," said Mohr. "I've studied every available film. It's Mike's technique, no doubt about it. The cuts, the dissolves, the laps and camera angles, close-ups—everything spells Mike Blackstone. A little sloppy now, but still Mike."

"When did he go behind the Curtain? How and why?"

Nick heard Preston Mohr sigh. Then the director said: "That was a case in which the punishment didn't fit the crime. There was no crime. Not at first, anyway. Mike Blackstone got caught in the McCarthy buzz saw. He was a lot younger then, of course, and maybe he had some radical ideas and even played around with the pinkoes, but to my sure knowledge he was never actually a Commie. Not then. But he sure as hell is now. You might say, in a sense, that the late senator made Mike a Commie. He took away his bread.

"Mike always was a crazy sort of bastard. Wild. Proud.

Independent as hell. Well, when he was called in front of a Congressional committee, he told them to shove it. He was the great Mike Blackstone and nobody was going to kick him around. But they did. They ruined him in Hollywood. He was blacklisted and soon lost every dime he had. He couldn't earn a living and he never had saved any money. From what I've heard, he and his wife Sybil almost literally starved to death. Mike was too proud to ask anyone for help, you see. So he made some quickies, low-budget stuff for small, independent outfits, under an assumed name. Then he went to Mexico and made some dirty films—stag-party stuff. Finally, he and Sybil disappeared from Mexico. They must have bought false passports—State had taken away both his and Sybil's—and later he turned up in Moscow. By that time, of course, Mike was a real Commie. They had sold him a bill of goods."

Hawk picked up another flimsy from his desk. "Black-Stone was reported in Moscow, Leningrad, Warsaw and Belgrade, doing some sort of Party work. Neither State nor CIA knows exactly what. The last report is that he is living in a villa outside Budapest. Apparently quite well off."

"That all ties in well enough," said Nick Carter.

Preston Mohr stood up. He glanced at his watch again, then at Hawk. "If I'm going to make that plane, sir? Of course if you really need me—"

Hawk came around the desk to shake hands with the debonair man. "You've done your bit, son. Thank you. Goodbye. Have a good trip."

As Preston Mohr shook hands with Nick their eyes met briefly. Very softly, Mohr said: "You're probably going to find Mike, and you're probably going to have to kill him. If you can, if at all possible, do it fast. Mike and I parted ways a long time ago, but there was a time when he was a pretty good Joe."

Killmaster inclined his head, but did not comment.

The door closed behind Preston Mohr.

Hawk said: "I know you're dying of the disease that killed the cat, and I can't help you. Just forget that you ever saw Preston Mohr. He's been under heavy cover for years and even I don't know who he works for. If I did, I couldn't tell you. To you, to us, he's just a famous movie director whom we have never met. Got it?"

"Got it."

"Good. Now go look in those boxes stacked along the wall and tell me what you find."

It was not like Hawk to be whimsical. Killmaster shot a glance at his boss and saw that he was not being whimsical. Hawk, an unlit cigar in his mouth, was leaning back in his chair and staring at the

ceiling with a look of black fury on his grim face.

Nick Carter opened one of the boxes and began to look through the glossy photos stacked within. After scanning a dozen, he turned to his boss. It had been a long, wearisome drag of an afternoon. What he had seen and heard had both irritated and revolted him. It was time for the imp in Nick to pop out—and pop out it did.

With a careful insolence that he knew just where to stop, Nick said: “I’m a little surprised at you, sir. A little shocked, too. I never suspected that you were such a dirty old man!”

Chapter 3

HAWK'S GIMLET EYES flickered, but he did not deign to reply to his subordinate's jibe. Hawk had worked with Nick Carter for a long time, on many perilous and difficult cases, and he came as close to knowing the real Carter as anyone could. Now the older man sensed that Nick's nerves were a trifle raw, sandpapered by this wretched afternoon. N3 was, after all, supposed to be on leave.

Hawk's inner feeling was one of satisfaction. Nick Carter always did a superb job. He probably was the best agent in the world. He was even better when goaded by the cold anger which Hawk very well knew was behind the agent's unwonted insolence.

Hawk said: "Pretty filthy, aren't they? It's their secondary line, you might say. Not as important as the films, no propaganda value, but still deadly enough. Pure smut." Hawk allowed himself a grim chuckle. "There's a contradiction in terms, if I ever heard one."

Nick silently continued to look through the contents of the boxes. "How did they happen to send all this filth to you?" he asked finally.

Hawk poured himself another drink. Nick had never seen his boss drink so much. "God only knows," Hawk said. He waved his glass at the boxes. "Channels got fouled up, as usual. That lovely little lot happens to be from your town, son. Fun City. From what I gather, the locals got most of it in raids around Times Square. Then, I suppose, the Feds moved in, probably at State's request, and took over. Some genius over on C Street gave it to the CIA, and when they handed us the baby, this stuff came with it. You seen enough now?"

"Too much," Nick said tartly. He had been looking at some of the pornography in comic-book form; he had experienced the same sense of shock that had accompanied his first sight of Mona Manning in lewd positions and contortions. Again he felt that the ultimate obscenity far surpassed both the basic and superficial bawdry. One could not, without extreme revulsion, accept the perverted sexual antics of Blondie and Dagwood, Maggie and Jiggs, or watch the seduction of a willing Orphan Annie by a wolflike Daddy Warbucks. Yes, they had even stooped to that!

"That stuff has been pouring into this country in rivers," Hawk said, "dirty rivers that the regular authorities haven't been able to stop. They fly it in from Canada and Mexico like dope—which it is, in a way—and they've shipped a lot in by boat. State, and the CIA, think the Chinese are giving the stuff away! That means no cost to the middleman or the retailer. It's the old drug gambit again—a huge profit with a minimum of risk."

Nick Carter flung down a batch of the comic books and went back to his chair. He stared at Hawk, rage glinting in his eyes. "Okay, sir," he rasped. "It's a mission. I know that. A hell raid. Seek and destroy. And my heart will really be in this one, believe me. So how much can you help me? Where do we start?"

Hawk nursed at his glass. He peered over it at Nick, his eyes icy. "That's where the shoe begins to pinch, son. I really can't help you much. CIA hasn't got much. I, AXE, haven't got anything but hand-me-downs. We can get you started, and that's about all. After that, you'll be strictly on your own. Naturally, we'll help all we can—but don't count on anything. Apart from what you've seen and heard so far, and what I'll tell you in a minute, there simply isn't anything!"

"This is a *carte-blanc* mission, then? I plan it, structure and time it, my own way? When I walk out of that door, I'm on my own?"

Hawk nodded. "You are. There will be no orders cut. You are to be responsible only to me. And what I don't know won't hurt me." Hawk took another sip of his whiskey and grimly grinned.

Nick also grinned, with tight lips and a white flash of teeth that was just as mirthless, and for a moment Hawk thought of a strange hybrid—half wolf and half tiger. With some hint of caution he said, "Just don't overdo it, N3. You know what I mean? Be careful who the corpses are, try not to have too many, and remember, if you get burned, I can't help you. Not officially."

"That's news?" Nick said dourly. "I don't even exist—officially."

"I know—I know. But this time, not only do you not exist, you haven't even been born yet! I've already had my briefing from State on that. They have high hopes of building the present detente with the Russians—and that means Hungary—into something approaching rapport: You know how those cookie pushers talk. Anyway, it means don't rock the boat. I trust I make myself clear?"

"You are absolutely lucid, sir. It's the same old deal. In like a ghost, out like a ghost, and hope I don't become a ghost."

Hawk stripped the cellophane from a new cigar. "That's it. Now I'll give you what is probably your starting point—I'd say it damned well has to be because there isn't anything else. There's a man called Paulus Werner."

Hawk stopped speaking and watched for Nick's reaction.

Nick said: "Name means nothing to me. Never heard of him. What about him?"

For an answer, Hawk picked up a flimsy from his desk. "This, from Glenn Boynton: When his agent, now ashes in that box, called him from London, he said: 'I picked up Paulus Werner today. He's just in from Budapest. I think he's in London to recruit. My cover is good, and I'll try to follow him back to—' "

Hawk looked over the flimsy at Nick. "That's all. End of phone call. Boynton says that he heard noises, sort of a gasping sound, and what might have been a struggle. Nothing after that. Someone hung up the phone in the kiosk."

He glanced at the paper again. "Scotland Yard traced the call to a street booth in Soho, corner of Greek and Old Compton Streets. It was half an hour before the CIA men got there. They found nothing. No blood, no damage, no signs of a fight—nothing at all."

No, thought Nick Carter. He had to disagree. Not exactly nothing. There had been the pitiful residue of a man—the little cardboard box with its grisly contents. He remembered Glenn Boynton's words: "We'll give it to his widow, along with a few wood ashes to make weight."

His face impassive, Killmaster said, "Tell me about this Paulus Werner. German?"

Hawk nodded. "We think so. West German passport, anyway. We got a bit lucky there. CIA had nothing on Werner, nor did we at AXE, but Interpol did. This Paulus Werner used to be a pimp in Hamburg. He Was a young man then. Later, he graduated from pimping to procuring for local whorehouses. An ambitious type, you see. Interpol has had him under surveillance from time to time but they've never had enough on him to make an arrest. They think he is, or has been, white-slaving—running women out of Europe and the UK to the Middle East and the Orient. And, more recently, taking them behind the Iron Curtain."

Nick Carter frowned. "The Russians are pretty damned moral about sex matters. They'd nail him for that. Probably shoot him."

Hawk said, "That's the point. Boynton said it: CIA doesn't think the Russians know about this deal, about the smut factory."

"It would tie in," Nick agreed. "They need models for those dirty pictures. Also a lot of extras and second leads for the movies. They could be getting them from this Werner, at that. If what Boynton thinks is true—that the Russians and Hungarians don't know what's going on— then the people running the factory wouldn't dare recruit locally. They would have to bring the girls in from outside."

Hawk had already chewed his cigar to a pulp. He tossed it into the wastebasket, then drained his glass and banged it down on the desk.

"Paulus Werner was in London a few days ago. Fact. Boynton's man was on his tail. And—"

"And thought his cover was good," Nick interrupted. "It wasn't. Fact."

Hawk frowned. "Boynton's agent knew that Werner was just in from Budapest. How he knew doesn't matter. Budapest does. The experts say those dirties are made in and around Budapest. The

makers of the films, and that other crap, need women to operate. Paulus Werner is suspected of running women. It does tie in, N3. Not air-tight, by any means, but it does tie in. And it's all we've got."

"All I've got." Nick's smile was faint. "Do I, by any chance, get a picture of this Werner?"

Hawk shook Ms head. "Interpol has one, yes. But it appears to be lost somewhere in Paris at the moment. Not much help."

Nick lit a cigarette. "Physical description? Any particular MO?"

Hawk consulted his papers again. "Not too much on. the description. In his fifties now, short, runs to fat, speaks English with a German accent. Dresses flashily. No particular mannerisms or exotic tastes noted. None would be if the guy is smart. He must be. Probably, he changes his appearance from time to time. About the MO—maybe just a bare chance. Werner has been known to organize little theatrical troupes and take them on tour. But he hasn't done that recently."

Nick had been lounging on his spine. Now he sat up a little straighter. "Girls in these troupes, of course?"

"Of course. Singers, dancers, acrobatic acts. That sort of thing."

Along with the wolf and tiger, Nick Carter also possessed a fair share of bloodhound.

"It just might be," he told Hawk. "Certainly the trail beckons. Maybe too much. When you take a real good look at it; it appears just a bit too obvious."

His chief told Nick what he already knew: That a good agent never overlooks the obvious. "And maybe it isn't so obvious from Werner's viewpoint," Hawk added emphatically. "He's never been picked up, you know. Just kept under surveillance. Maybe he doesn't know it. Maybe he thinks he's in the clear and has the world on a string. He hasn't used the theatrical-troupe bit for a long time, and maybe he figures he can go back to it now without risk. It's worth a try, N3. Just get on with it."

Killmaster stood up and stretched. He reminded Hawk of a gigantic, sleekly muscled cat.

"I've got to find him first," said Nick. "London is a big place. Eight million people."

"Soho is about the size of Greenwich Village," said Hawk. "And just about the same kind of place. If Werner is in London to recruit, he'll be moving in certain circles. That should narrow it down a great deal. Goodbye, son. Let me have all the facts—when you come back."

Nick, before he left the building on Dupont Circle, went down to the sub-basements again. He had to pick up a fresh stock of ammo for the Luger. AXE made its own ammo, all carefully done by hand. Nick usually measured, filled and tamped his own cartridges, but there was no time now.

Before leaving, he stopped by for a brief chat with Old Man Poindexter, who was in charge of Special Effects and Editing. Although Poindexter's round face had the fading benignity of a Santa Claus who has been on a strict diet, in point of fact, the old man was rail-thin, and had always reminded Nick rather of Cassius than Claus. The old man was glad to see Killmaster, whom he regarded as much his protege as Hawk's.

"Going on a mission, boy?"

Nick smiled and nodded Vaguely. It was a rhetorical question and both knew it. AXE personnel did not discuss AXE business among themselves unless it was germane, and the AXE organization was rigidly compartmented.

Nick took the 9-mm Luger from his shoulder holster—the only weapon he was carrying, and that more for comfort than any expected use—and laid it on the counter. He took off his jacket and wriggled out of the shoulder harness.

"I'm changing my ways, Dad," he told Poindexter. "I want a belt holster."

"Oh?" The old man picked up the Luger and ran a finger along the barrel. "You're going to have to get this reblued one of these days, you know."

Nick grinned. "I know—I know. You mention it every time I see you. I'll get to it—one day. Now, how about the new holster?"

"Coming up," said the old man. He disappeared behind a row of tall metal cabinets. "Change," he muttered. "Always change. Off with the old and on with the new. The young are never satisfied. Plastic or leather, Nick?"

"Leather, please. Remember, it has to have belt loops."

Poindexter came back with the holster. He handed it to Nick along with a pencil and a printed form. "Sign for it."

Watching Nick scrawl his initials across the bottom of the form, the old man said, "Any particular reason for the switch?" Such questions were not verboten between them.

Nick Carter tossed down the pencil and winked at his old friend. "Best reason in the world, Dad. I ran a test a couple of weeks ago. The belt holster is a fifteenth of a second faster. I didn't believe it myself at first, but it is."

Old Geoffrey Poindexter nodded knowingly. In the terrible and inexorable logic of AXE it made all the sense in the world.

Killmaster caught a commercial flight back to New York. As he fastened his seat belt he glanced at his wristwatch. It would be well after nine before he got back to the penthouse. He relaxed with the ease of a seasoned traveler, oblivious of the takeoff, his keen mind

reviewing the events of the day like a tape running backward.

One factor above all was time! Paulus Werner, the procurer, was his only lead. And Werner was in London—or had been very recently. Even if the man already had left London, and was somewhere on the Continent, perhaps heading back to Budapest with a new cargo of flesh—even then it might be possible to find him, or to pick up his trail. Interpol might be of some assistance, but Nick was reluctant to bring them into it. Hawk had been most emphatic—this was a do-it-yourself operation!

Nick dozed. He refused a proffered drink. He remembered Hawk's very last words. "You can forget about Vietnam, son."

"With great pleasure," Nick had said. "It stinks." He had not asked the obvious question, knowing how his silence would irritate Hawk.

"All right," Hawk had said at last. "I sent you on that shoot because I thought you needed it—I'd like to keep you alive as long as possible, and anyway, it's hell to break in a new boy—and because I'd been given a clue that this Mission Dirty was coming up. It was a just-in-case move."

Nick had maintained his silence. He did not believe there was really a leak in the inner sanctums of AXE. He did not think Hawk believed it. Yet, the old man never missed a trick.

Hawk had fumbled for a cigar, discovered with dismay that he was out, and had accepted a gold-tipped cigarette, grumbling. "I'll tell you something that happened to me during the war," he said.

It was understood between them that Hawk meant World War I.

"Just after the war, really. I was nothing but a kid. They issued us hot-weather clothing, tropical stuff, and all the rumors were that we were going to Africa or maybe the Canal Zone. I ended up in Archangel, fighting the Red Army. It taught me a lesson."

The plane hit an air pocket and dipped. Nick jolted out of his doze. Hawk left nothing to chance. But the old man did have one great fault—he would hand you an almost impossible assignment, then act as though he was sending you to the corner for coffee.

It was a quarter to ten when Nick entered the penthouse. Pok met him in the foyer. "Is lady waiting for you, sar. Long time wait. I put in study. Okay?"

Nick muttered something obscene under his breath. But he ruffled the boy's thick hair and fell into Korean pidgin. "Name have yes? This lady?"

Pok frowned at his master. "We say not talk so! Talk Straight. How I learn good English like so?"

"I humbly beg your" pardon, Pok. *Mea culpa*. And mow—the lady's name?"

“Flaw,” said Pok. “Flaw Vorhis. I think.”

“You think wrong,” Nick said. “But at least you’re consistent. You get it wrong the same way every time. You say you put her in the study?”

“Yis. Long time now. She ask for drink, I take. Then I take bottle. I think now lady is beaucoup blistered.” Pok went back to his kitchen.

Nick shook his head. Maybe the boy was taking on too much, trying to learn French right along with English. He had meant to ask the kid how it had gone at school but that would have to wait. Nick was catching an early flight to Londoni

He swore again as he made his way to the study. Now, he remembered seeing the gold-and-silver Jaguar XK-E parked at the curb below. That should have tipped him, damn it! Florence Vorhees was on the prowl for him again. But—he hesitated with his hand on the knob of the study door—but what could he have done in any case? Sleep in a hotel? Go to the club? To hell with that! This was his house. And Florence Vorhees was just another predatory woman.

Still he hesitated outside the door, frowning. Had it been Gabrielle, he wouldn’t have minded—a little sexual play before a tough mission was good for him. But it wasn’t Gabrielle—she didn’t offer herself on a platter. Not as Florence did. The trouble with Florence was too much money. Too much success with men. She couldn’t understand no, couldn’t fathom why Nick hadn’t swooned for her before this. So she kept dogging him. And tonight of all nights ...

The idea popped up then. Fiendish. Nick smiled cruelly. There is a little of the sadist in the best of us, he philosophized. He hummed a little tune as he flung open the door of the study.

The girl on the long divan before the fireplace turned her head as Nick entered. “Hi, Nicholas. Where in hell have you been? I’ve been waiting hours.”

Nick glanced toward the red phone on a taboret in a corner. He half hoped it would buzz, that Hawk had forgotten something. He could beg off with good grace, wouldn’t have to go through with the planned rudeness. For this was one of Killmaster’s strangest dichotomies; he could kill a woman, if he must, but he could not bear to be rude to her. But this time? Yes. She goddamned well had it coming. He would, for once and all time, get rid of this pursuing little hot-pants.

His face was impassive. He fixed the girl with a cold eye. “I don’t remember,” he said brusquely, “that we had a date. Certainly not here.”

The girl stood up, lurching a little. Nick saw that the bottle on the coffee table was half-empty. Pok must be right. She was “beaucoup blistered.” And yet, she handled it pretty well. He could hardly detect

the slur in her words.

"Come on," he said. "I'll take you home. You're in no condition to drive. You can pick your car up in the morning." By that time he would be in London, looking for a needle in a haystack, a needle named Werner.

The girl swayed toward him. She was wearing a double-faced white satin frock—very demure at the neck and very short over the knees—that Nick would have bet was a Dior. . The huge crystal buttons were just that—real crystal. About a thousand dollars' worth of dress.

She tripped on a throw rug—the floor of the study was of parquet which Pok kept polished like a bowling alley—and plunged straight at Nick. Even a reluctant gentleman has to catch a lady. Nick caught her. She was a dead weight in his arms, her eyes an inch from his, her pouting red mouth even closer. Florence Vorhees had very blue eyes, slightly protuberant. Her mouth was wide and wet, her teeth good although not perfect. Her complexion was matte, not too coarse, and just at the moment her nose was exceedingly shiny. She exuded an odor of good Scotch, Nick's Scotch.

"Whyn't you like me, Nicholas?" She clung tighter and ran her moist lips across his cheek. "I like-you. I'm crazy about you. Crazy for you, too. You see how I chase you. No pride."

Nick made what he had to admit was a half-hearted attempt to disengage her. He could, had he chosen, have crushed her in one hand like a beer can. But he was a little weary, a little disgusted by the afternoon he had put in; he needed a drink or two, a clear head to plan, a few hours' sleep. The hell of it was that he was beginning to react to her. That the reaction was purely physical did not signify—he was, or at least his big body was, becoming increasingly aware of her small body. She was a short girl, but superbly built She had tight little breasts, a firm torso and fanny, and exceedingly shapely, long legs.

Florence rubbed her belly against his. "Don't make me go, Nicholas. Please! Let me stay—just this once. If you do, I promise never to bother you again."

Nick shook his head wearily. "You're the damnedest girl, Flo. And you pick the worst times. I'm filthy, cruddy. I just got off a plane and I've had a hell of a day. I need a bath and some sleep. Now, why don't you just—"

She nuzzled against him and wriggled her little pelvis again. "No! I won't go. Not until I get what I came here for. Come on, old Nicholas. Give little Florence what she came here for."

Nick held her away from him. That nubile, soft body of hers was beginning to play hell with his self-control. A grim thought struck him and he had to chuckle. "You wouldn't, I suppose, be interested in a

good job in Budapest?"

She squinted her blue eyes at him. He noticed that they were a little glassy now. "What's that supposed to mean, Nicholas? Of course I don't want a job. I don't want nothing—anything, but you."

He made up his mind. If ever a woman was asking for it—and, in any case, he wasn't going to get any sleep unless he did something. It had been over a week now since he'd had a woman. He had been recuperating from South Vietnam and the jungle crud. But now he was aroused, by God, and when Nick Carter was aroused something had to happen!

So he pulled the girl to him and kissed her roughly. "All right! Okay, Flo. If you don't mind acting like a slut, and being treated like one, it's all the same to me. Come on. Into the bedroom."

"Carry me, please. I'm a little drunkie."

Nick tossed her over his shoulder and carried her into the bedroom like a sack of potatoes. Her skirt fell down and he saw that she was wearing gold-textured tights. Her hair, flopping into her eyes, was a golden flambeau to match.

She giggled as he flung her on the bed. "I'm a lady," she said. "You know I am, Nicholas. But I just love it when you treat me like a slut. Keep it up."

Nick was already undressing. "I intend to," he told her coldly. "As long as you stay. I didn't invite you, I don't even want you, but if you stay, you're going to take the treatment you get and like it."

"Wrong word, Nicholas." Her words were muffled. She was pulling the satin frock over her head. She tossed the frock on the floor and squirmed over on her back and lay there looking up at him. "Wrong word," she said again. "Not like it—love it! When do we start, Romeo?"

Nick repressed a smile. Damn the woman. She was beginning to get to him, to get under his skin.

"Control yourself," he told her. "Try to act like a lady even if you aren't. And—" Here he had to laugh. "And you aren't, believe me."

"I know. I've had the lady-bit up to here. From Dad and Mother. From my dear lady teachers at school—even when they were trying to make me. But I'm not a lady. I don't want to be a lady."

He ignored that. "I've got to take a shower. And then, if you're still here when I get back, I am going to show you no mercy. Better be smart, kid. Grab your clothes and run for your life."

"Hah! Foolish Nicholas. I told you I'm no lady. No fool, either. I know you're only doing it to get rid of me. I know you can have a million women in this town. So what—I've got you tonight, and that's all I care about. Do you really have to take a bath?"

"I really do. It's a tradition in my family. Cleanliness before

sexliness.”

“Can’t I have just a weeny sample before you go? I’ll be awfully lonely.”

“No.”

He stood by the bed for a moment looking down at her. She was on her back, her legs wide-flung. She was wearing the golden-textured tights and a tiny black bra. Nothing else. She slitted her eyes at him and held out her arms, wriggling her fingers.

“Later,” he said and disappeared.

When he returned from the bathroom she had slipped out of the tights and the bra. He left a single dim light burning, then entered her without preliminary. He was gentle enough, but without tenderness. Florence did not appear to mind. Nick was not surprised, of course, to have confirmed what he had known for a long time: Sex with a stranger—and Flo was very nearly that—can be highly satisfying.

He kept his promise not to spare her. He had long been a devotee of yoga and his old guru had taught him many tricks, some of them sexual. So Nick, who was by nature a highly sexed man, had learned how to add tremendous endurance and iron discipline to an already bursting vitality.

Florence Vorhees learned about men that night. The first thing she learned was that she had never known a real man before, in spite of a record of promiscuity that would have shocked her parents to death.

After a time it began to be too much, yet she kept her bargain and did not scream for mercy. She knew she would not get it. And she did not really want it. She sensed that this night was an important one in her life, a high mark, a night she would remember when she was an old, old woman.

Later, Nick gazed down at the sleeping girl without really thinking of her. It was over now. It had been good. A release. Pok could give her a couple of aspirins in the morning, perhaps some coffee, and send her on her way. He glanced at the little gold clock. In an hour he must get up, take another shower, and be on his way to Kennedy Airport.

The girl had given him an idea, with her talk about sluts. Soho was full of sluts—paid and otherwise. So that was it—he would go and mingle with the girls. Maybe one of them would lead him to Paulus Werner.

It wasn’t much of an idea, but it was all he had.

Chapter 4

SOHO WAS swinging. The heavy, “brownish-yellow fog, so unusual for September, could not dampen the frenetic gaiety of the bars and discotheques, the pizza parlors and the private clubs where you could drink after hours. Of course, you had to be a member. Membership cost anywhere from one pound to five, and you had to be introduced by someone you had known at least for half an hour.

It was a little after nine in the evening. A fine drizzle Was beginning to wet the greasy streets. The tall man with the big shoulders, lounging near a stationer’s shop on Greek Street, just off Soho Square, glanced at his watch and shrugged a little deeper into his tan Burberry. He pulled the snap-brim hat a little lower over his eyes. The hat was gray, with a wide welt, and made him look like a spiv, a London parasite, which was exactly the impression he wished to convey.

But there were drawbacks. He had been in London a couple of days now, loafing around the Soho district, and he was beginning to draw the attention of the police. The bobbies had not pulled him in yet, nor had they questioned him, but Killmaster knew it was only a question of time. The Metropolitan Police kept a careful and jaundiced eye on the wide boys.

Nick Carter had extraperipheral vision—it had saved his life more than once—and now, without turning his head, he could see the police car slowly moving into the Square. Damn the coppers! This was the second time in half an hour that the car had prowled past him.

The big man swung on his heel and walked rapidly back up Greek Street toward Bateman. He was carrying the Luger tonight, and the stiletto was in a chamois sheath that was securely strapped to his right arm. If the bobbies got him, a lot of explanations would be necessary. Questions would be asked—and asked and asked—questions which Nick would not be able to answer without blowing his mission.

Between the Square and Bateman Street there was a narrow, cobbled lane leading off to the right. At the moment, the area was quiet, an odd hush had fallen over the usual cacophony of the district, and Nick could hear the soft purr of the police car as it came down the street. He was careful not to glance over his shoulder. Without hesitation, he turned into the narrow lane and kept walking, not hurrying, like a man with a destination firmly in mind.

The police car, its tires hissing on the wet pavement, passed the mouth of the lane and was gone.

Nick breathed easier. Too close, he thought. His luck wasn’t going

to hold forever. Not that it had been much good as it was—not as far as finding Paulus Werner was concerned. He hadn't found the man and it began to look as though he wasn't going to find him. After discreetly questioning barmen, pimps, queers, prostitutes, taxi drivers, barrow boys, assorted thieves, and various types of con men, he had learned exactly nothing.

If Paulus Werner was still in London, he had thus far managed to keep it a secret. The man's cover and connections must be excellent. Nick was disgusted. He had promised himself this last foray, this last night of searching, before instituting an alternate plan. It would, he admitted gloomily now, have even less chance of succeeding than the first. But a man had to keep trying. He—

"Buy a girl a drink, mister?"

Nick swung around. The girl was standing in a niche in an otherwise blank wall, before what appeared to be a bricked-up door. Nick shot a quick glance up and down the lane. It looked completely deserted in the swirling fog and rain. But he took nothing for granted. Still, this did not look or feel like a trap.

"How about it, mister?" the girl persisted.

Why not? He had promised himself one more shot. This might be the lucky strike. Nick Carter, completely in character in his role of spiv, small-time operator on the town and on the make, swaggered over to the girl.

"Sure will, honey. But how about having a look at you first?"

"Of course, mister. You've got a right to see what you're getting," the girl said bluntly. She came out of the niche and took his arm. Nick saw that she was very young, too young to have had much experience at this sort of thing. And there was something else—her accent was wrong. It was not a London accent. Nick was no Professor Higgins, but he knew a south-of-England accent when he heard it, the soft, slurring drawl that she was trying so hard to conceal. Wilts? More likely Dorset or Devon. A county girl, for God's sake, going to hell in the Big Smoke!

He slowed his pace to hers as they walked toward the far end of the lane. She was fairly tall, and looked thin, and emaciated. She wore a cheap cloth coat with a bedraggled collar, and she was bareheaded, with her dark hair worn in a long ponytail.

"How old are you?" Nick knew, of course, that any cautious older man would be sure to ask that question.

"Old enough, mister. Don't worry about that. I know what I'm about." She squeezed his arm with bony fingers. He saw that she was not wearing gloves. He felt her shiver.

"Are you cold?"

"Not very. The fog a bit chilly. I should have worn my mink!" She

laughed hollowly.

So far she hadn't dropped an aitch, Nick realized. Other than the soft accent of the south, she spoke like any fairly Well-educated middle-class girl. Lower middle-class might be a little nearer the mark. In any case, he told himself, she wasn't likely to do him much good. Prostitute she seemed to be, but it was very unlikely that she would know Paulus Werner.

And yet, she might! The man could be trying to recruit just this type, this quasi-innocent, whore manque. Above all, she was young. Youth brought a high price in the marts where Paulus Werner traded.

They came to the end of the lane. Frith Street. To the right, a pub sent a scarlet-and-green wash of neon over the wet, gleaming pavement. The girl said, "That's the Turk's Head. We could go there."

"You really want that drink, ducks?" To Nick, she had sounded more reluctant than thirsty. A stall. To her, a drink probably meant a shandy—lemonade and light ale—or a ginger beer. And there was always the possibility that she was playing some sort of cute little game. Maybe she had a ponce, a bruiser, who would be turning up any minute now—or a little later. It could even be one of the many versions of the old badger game.

"I don't really care all that much," the girl replied. "Shall we go to my place, then?"

"Half a mo'," said Nick. The light was better here. He put a finger under her chin and raised it. "I said I wanted a look art you."

She pulled her chin away and thrust it up at him. "Then look, damn it! You'll find me worth anything you can afford to pay."

Proud. Frightened and trying to hide it. And she had recently been crying. Killmaster read all that in one swift, expert appraisal. Her face was heart-shaped, very pale, with only a slash of lipstick on the wide, full-lipped mouth. Her eyes were huge, or perhaps it was her pallor that somehow exaggerated their size. They looked violet in the garish neon. Her hair was dark-brown, sparkled with sequins of rain, and in some disarray.

She pulled away from him and stared back defiantly. "Seen enough, mister?" she asked angrily. "Am I worth five pounds?"

Nick now chose to come on heavy with the older-man bit. He had made a quick decision. This kid wasn't going to help him find Werner, but maybe he could use her in his alternate scheme.

He made his voice bluff and hearty. "What you really want, my girl, is a good slap on the backside and to be sent home to Mum. A kid like you has got no business doing what you're doing."

The girl took another step back. "Never mind the Salvation Army lecture, mister," she said with an unbecoming sneer. "You interested or not? I can't afford to waste my time. I've got a living to make, same

as anyone.”

“No need to get on your high horse,” Nick said quickly. “I’m definitely interested. Come on, then. We’ll go to my place and—”

The girl had been about to take his arm again. But she backed off and looked at him with narrowed eyes. “Your place? Not me, mister. We go to my place, or we don’t go anywhere.”

“My place!” Nick said firmly. He shot a look up and down the street again. It would not do to hang around there much longer.

“Fifty pounds,” he said. “Fifty pounds, if we go to my place. That, or nothing. What do you say?”

The rain was beginning to get heavier, slanting through the dirty-yellow fog.

A group of Mods came along, walking five abreast Nick quickly pulled the girl out of the way. He wanted no trouble now.

But the kids did. The one on the inside, a pimpled stripling, bumped hard into Nick.

The youth turned on Nick in a feigned fury. “Why don’t you watch it, you old bastard!”

The other four stopped and gathered around the tall kid, expectantly grinning. One of them said, “Take it easy, Ronnie, you might hurt the old gent—be on your conscience forever, if you. did.” They all laughed uproariously.

Nick took a firm grip on the girl’s thin arm. He didn’t want her to take off in a panic. He cursed under his breath. Damn the jerks! They were attracting attention and that he couldn’t afford. His phony Limey impersonation would just have to go by the board.

He stepped forward so abruptly that the youth was taken completely by surprise. In the next instant, Nick had gathered the folds of the Mod’s leather jacket in one huge hand and had lifted the kid off his feet. He held him at arm’s length, then shook him, as a terrier shakes a rat.

Speaking in good, clear Yank, in his natural voice, Nick snarled, “Beat it, punk!”

He threw the boy to the wet sidewalk with one shove. The boy’s astonished cronies stared at Nick, their grins frozen in blank awe. Then they helped their comrade to his feet and hastily stalked off down the glistening street in the opposite direction.

“You’re a Yank!” the girl said breathlessly.

“Right.” Nick’s voice was brusque. “But never mind that now. I’m going to get a taxi, then we can talk and you can make up your mind if you want to come to my place. Fifty pounds, remember, and I assure you there’s nothing to fear.”

She did not demur as he hailed a taxi, then helped her into it. She immediately slid away from him and sat in the opposite corner.

Nick told the driver to go to Hyde Park Corner.

They turned off Shaftesbury and got jammed in traffic on the Circus. The pale glare of the Bovril sign filled the cab. Nick glanced at the girl and saw that, beneath the damp cloth coat, she was wearing a mini-skirt and gunmetal-gray stockings that were too short for her long legs. Above her stocking tops he could see a band of pale skin and the dull glint of a garter tab. She had fine legs, sleek and slim, perhaps a little too slim. She looked as if she needed a couple of weeks of good feeding.

The girl glared at Nick and yanked at the mini-skirt. But when she saw his easy grin, she desisted. Instead, she crossed her legs with a hiss of nylon and flaunted them in front of him.

Now she asked: "If I do go to your place—what do you expect for fifty pounds? W-what do you want to—do to me for all that money?"

Nick fumbled in his Burberry for a pack of Players and offered her one. He was smoking British these days.

She shook her head. "I don't smoke."

Nick fit it for himself. "Would you believe that I just want to talk to you for fifty pounds?"

She sniffed. "Come off it, mister. What's your game, anyway? Pretending to be English back there—and you a Yank. And dressing like a spiv ... I can't think what you're up to—unless ... Oh!" She moved back farther into her corner and gazed at him with wide eyes in which there was a hint of terror.

Nick held her gaze. Her eyes still looked violet.

When she spoke now her voice was unsteady. "You—you're a pimp! That's it. Y-you want me to work for you."

Nick chuckled. "I've been called a lot of things in my time, but never that. No, my dear. I do want you to work for me, but not along those lines. However, we'll have to talk it over first. What do you say?"

The taxi extricated itself from a traffic snarl and moved along Piccadilly. The girl was staring at Nick, her lower lip caught in her teeth, a slight frown marring the smooth forehead beneath the dark, fog-dampened hair.

"You're a strange one," she said as she studied Nick's face with narrowed eyes. "I've half a mind to trust you."

"Good," said Nick. "Make up the other half. Fast! I haven't got all night to play games."

"All right, I'll go along. But I warn you: I can scream like a siren."

"Let us hope," said Killmaster slowly, "that it won't come to that." He tapped on the glass and gave the driver new instructions.

By the time they had reached the flat that Nick had taken in Kensington he had learned her name: Pamela Martin. And yes, she

was from Dorset—just since two months ago. But how in the world could the Yank know that?

Nick did not explain. He gave her his cover name, Nathan Connors, the name on his present passport, which was a superb job of forgery by the Documents section of AXE. She could call him Nate, he told her.

When they entered the little flat, which was as tidy and characterless as a hotel room, Pamela stiffened, but nevertheless she made straight for the bedroom door. Then she paused and looked back at Nick quizzically.

Nick dropped his hat and Burberry on a chair. "I said talk, Pam," he said sternly, "and I meant talk. But we'll have a drink first. And then something to eat. I've got a lot of canned stuff in the kitchen. Part of your work, part of earning that fifty pounds, will be to fix us a meal—after we talk."

He took her coat. It was sodden, the thin cloth soaked through to the lining. He put a shilling in the meter and lit the gas fire, hanging the coat in front of the heater on a hanger, which he bent to fit the curve of the scarred mantel.

The girl perched on the edge of a rump-sprung sofa, her knees primly together, still fighting the mini-skirt and looking as though she would leap up and flee at any moment.

Nick mixed them both a Scotch-and-soda, handed one to Pam, and retired to an armchair. Now that he had her, he wasn't so sure he wanted her. She wasn't the type, after all, to fit into the harebrained scheme he had dreamed up in case he couldn't find Paulus Werner.

Still—she was here. He had nothing to lose by pursuing matters.

"I hope you won't take offense," he said, "but you really aren't much of a prostitute, are you?"

To his surprise and amusement, Pam began to turn beet-red. She avoided his eyes and took a quick drink, then gagged on the whiskey, coughing.

"I—I haven't been at it very long," she said finally. "And it isn't as easy as I thought it would be. But I'll learn. I do learn. Every night. Every day."

Nick leaned toward her. He was now fascinated by this strange girl. "You want to be a whore? A pretty young girl like you?"

Pam raised her eyes and stared at him angrily. By God, he told himself, her eyes certainly are violet!

"I don't want to be," she said. "I have to be. I want to make money, a lot of money, and it's the only way I can do it. All I have to sell is—me! I left a dreary little farm in Dorset, and a life that was dull as ditchwater, to come to London and seek my fortune."

She took another sip of her drink, made a face, and giggled at

Nick. "Sounds silly, doesn't it? Just like Dick Whittington. But I really mean it. I mean to get ahead in the world!"

For once in his life, Nick Carter was completely flabbergasted. He got up, drink in hand, and paced the floor a couple of times. This kid couldn't be for real! he thought Yet, maybe she was telling the truth. Nuttier things had happened. Of course, there must be a great deal more to it than what she was telling.

Still, as he returned to his chair, Killmaster was a somewhat shaken man.

He considered Pam for a long moment before he spoke again. She looked away and slowly sipped her drink, then tugged the mini-skirt down over her garters. At last, she said, "Must you stare at me so? I'm not all that unusual, you know. A lot of girls come to London for the very same reason."

"I suppose so," Nick murmured. "It's just that I've never met any of them before."

Her sharp little chin jutted toward him. "You're pretty damned mysterious yourself, you know. I know you're not what you're supposed to be, but just what are you? What are we doing here, anyway, if you don't want to go to bed with me?"

Nick shook himself. Leave it to him to pick up a kook. But—and it was a big but—maybe he could use her, after all. If she was really as kookie as she seemed, she might do.

"Suppose," he began, "suppose I could show you a way to make quite a lot of money without—without doing what you've—uh—been doing?" What the hell was the matter with him? A woman had never thrown him off balance before.

Pam cradled her bony chin in her long, thin fingers. "I'd be interested, of course. I told you I don't want to be a whore. And I haven't been doing very well at it, either. So tell me, Nate. How can I make all this money you're talking about?"

All day, ever since it had become apparent that he was not going to find Paulus Werner in Soho, Nick had been working on his alternate plan. He had even gone so far as to call a number in a building on Wine Office Mews, and make tentative arrangements. He decided to take the plunge.

"All right, Pam," he said softly. "I'll level with you. I am looking for girls, but not for the reason you supposed. I'm organizing a theatrical troupe, to tour the Continent—maybe the Balkans and the Near East. If you can sing, or dance, so much the better. But, in the main, I need pretty girls—like you."

Killmaster, in all his crowded life, had been ever alert, prepared for anything. But he was not prepared for what Pamela Martin did now.

She sat looking at him with an expression of utter loathing. But

there was a glint of fear in the violet eyes.

Her wide mouth opened, and her pink tongue licked nervously at her lips.

“Oh, my God! You’re one of those! Like—like him!”

She leaped from the sofa and ran for the door, her slim legs flashing beneath the short skirt.

“Let me out of here! Right now!” she screamed.

Chapter 5

NICK CAUGHT HER in an instant. He picked her up, covered her mouth with a huge hand, and carried her back to the sofa. She was so small and frail, so soft against his muscular bulk. He sat down, cradling her as though she were a baby, and kept his hand over her mouth. "What in the hell is the matter with you, Pamela?" he whispered harshly.

She kicked her long legs in the air and tried to claw him. Nick got a glimpse of flimsy pink underthings.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Nick said. "Try to get that through your stupid little head. But I've got to talk to you. You may know something that I have to know. Now—who is the him that you're so afraid of?" He put one hand around her slender throat. "I'm going to let you talk now. But if you let out one scream, I'll shut off your Wind. Okay?"

She nodded in desperation.

He eased the pressure on her throat and removed his hand from her mouth.

The big violet eyes stared up at him. On impulse, and because he knew that tenderness with a woman was sometimes of great value, and would work when nothing else would, he kissed her—very gently. It might, he thought, work even with a little London prostitute. And he was beginning to think that he needed her—that he had lucked into something.

She sat up and rubbed her throat. "What a brute you are!" she said in a crackling voice.

Reluctantly, Nick let her slide off his lap. "Okay, Pam. Now tell me: Who is the man and how am I like him?"

"He's a brute, that's what! A greasy brute. He goes around Soho trying to get girls to work for him just like you said you wanted me to do. Only it isn't like that at all. The girls go away and they never come back."

"How do you know all this, Pam?" Nick asked.

She pulled her blouse off her shoulder, revealing a great purple bruise.

"He did that to you?" Nick was incredulous.

The girl nodded. "Yes. Right in the street, outside a pub. I'd gone in to have a drink with him. I—well, you know, I picked him up, although I hated the sight of him. Anyway, we had our drink and I soon found out that he didn't want to go with me. Not in the ordinary way, that is. I don't think he likes girls, and he was pretty drunk. But,

after a time, he made me a proposition, and I got up and ran out of the pub. He caught me and grabbed my arm. That's when he did this. Then he pushed me down into the gutter and went away."

Nick got up and paced the little room. He gave Pam another drink and lit a cigarette. She sat silently on the sofa, her sharp little chin cupped in her left hand as she stared at her glass.

Killmaster was not much of a believer in coincidences. He distrusted them utterly. Still they did happen. A wise man took advantage of them.

"Was the man's name Werner, by any chance? Paulus Werner?"

"I don't know. He did tell me a name, but I've forgotten it. But it didn't sound like that."

No matter. Werner was unlikely to use his real name—if Werner was his real name.

Nick stood looking down at Pant "What did he look like?"

Her description fit perfectly: Short, fat, and in his fifties. He spoke English with a German accent. A flashy dresser. The spiv type, very much like the character that Nick himself was playing tonight.

One thing bothered Nick a lot. Werner might be a pimp and a procurer and a rat-fink, but he certainly wasn't stupid. He would never have reached his fifties if he had been.

Nick cupped the girl's chin in his huge palm. He tilted her face toward him and stared down into those big violet eyes. He let his own eyes grow cold and remote. He felt a tremor run through her. Good. He wanted her to be a little scared.

"This is important," he told her. "How did you know about this man? What he is, what he does with the girls he takes out of the country? Who told you all that?"

"A lot of the girls know about him. Two or three of them warned me to stay away from him. He's been around Soho a lot and the girls have gotten to know him. Of course, some of them went with him anyway—but none of them ever came back."

It was not enough. Nick shook his head angrily. Perhaps he was looking for a trap or a plant where there was none.

"How did the girls get to know him?"

Pam shrugged. "I guess they went with him sometimes. I don't really know. But I believe them. One or two of them got postcards or letters, I think. Maybe there was something in those."

Killmaster nodded. "Maybe. Probably." He had to smile at himself. It was that simple. Paulus Werner had slipped. Or someone else had slipped. A girl sneaking out of a hotel at night to post a letter, or paying to have one smuggled out. As simple as that. A tiny thing, yet now it was going to do Paulus Werner in. Nick still stood looking down at the girl, thinking, and the look on his face frightened Pam

again.

“Okay, Pam,” Nick said finally. “We have to get moving. Do you think you can find the man again?”

Pam was hesitant. “Maybe ... He goes to that pub a lot, I think. It’s the Blind Beggar in the East End. A tough place.”

Werner must have realized that his welcome was wearing out in Soho. He had changed his hunting grounds.

“Do you think, if you do find him, he would go with you?” asked Nick.

“I don’t know. I told you—I really think he likes boys.”

Nick gently squeezed her round little knee. “He might go with you if you offered him some special inducements,” he suggested.

“I won’t!” she said fiercely. “He’s a horrible, greasy beast, and I wouldn’t let him touch me again for all the money in the world.”

“He won’t touch you,” said Killmaster. “Not intimately. I promise you that, Pam. But you’ve got to get him to your place! He wouldn’t come here because the neighborhood is wrong. So it has to be your place. Get him there! Now. Tonight! I don’t give a damn how you do it, but do it. You must!”

Pam was looking at him wonderingly. “Why? What’s he to you?”

He had to tell her something. “I want to put that man behind bars,” he said officiously. “For a long stretch. I’ve been looking for him for a very long time. I can’t tell you any more than that. It wouldn’t be good for you to know, anyway. You’ll just have to trust me, Pam. Will you do it?” That was enough. Let her think he was some sort of cop—maybe from Interpol. It wouldn’t blow the mission.

At last, she said: “All right. I’ll do it. I don’t know why, Nate Connors—if that is your name—but for some reason I trust you. I don’t think you’d let any harm come to a girl.”

“I wouldn’t,” he said, and kissed her again. This time she clung to him. To his surprise he tasted the salt of tears on her cheeks. “It’s just my rotten luck,” she said, “that I couldn’t have met someone like you before I went bad.”

Nick gently pulled her to her feet. “You’re not all that bad,” he said. “Not yet, anyway. And maybe your luck is due for a change. Now, let’s go to work.”

Pam had a squalid room in Pulteney Mews. Nick took one look and decided that it would do.. The bath was down the hall, but there was a closet. That was all he would need.

He gave the girl last-minute instructions. “Try to get him to drink—but not too much. I want him just tiddly but not dead-drunk. I have to make him talk, you see? Be sure that nobody else comes with you. That’s very important! Now, when you come in with him, be careful to

lock the door. Make it look natural."

She nodded. "It would be, anyway. I always lock the door when I bring a man up here."

"Good." Nick handed her some money, but not very much. If Werner saw her with a lot of money, he would get suspicious. He would be as wily as the snake he was.

They rehearsed again what he had told her on their way over in the taxi: She had not had any luck in London, she was broke, and she had been thinking over his offer. Werner might just go for that, especially if he were a little drunk.

Nick went to the door with her. He patted her firm little fanny "You'll have to be a pretty good little actress. Think you can handle it?" he asked.

She smiled at him. It was the first genuine smile he had seen on her face all night. "I think so," she replied. "I'll try ever so hard. But suppose I can't find him?"

Nick shrugged, his big shoulders straining the cloth of his jacket. "Then we'll just have to try another time. But I've got a hunch that our luck is going to be in." It was true. He was not much of a hunch player, as a rule, but now he had a strong feeling that the tide was running in his direction. Meeting this particular girl, on this particular night looked a real break.

On the verge of leaving, Pam turned to Nick again. Once more there was a shadow of doubt in the big violet eyes. "You—you really are a policeman? You're going to arrest him? Not k—not hurt him?"

He had foreseen that she was going to ask more questions. She was too intelligent not to. So he would just have to lie and keep feeding her bits and pieces of information to keep her happy.

"Yes, I really am a policeman." In a way it was true, of course. He gave her a little push. "Out, now. Let me worry about the rest."

When Pam had gone, he gave the room a fast check. Nothing. It was pitiful. The usual barren squalor of a rooming house in Soho. In the taxi coming over, she had told him that she had been in the place barely a week. That was good for what he had in mind. There would be no easy way to trace a girl like Pam, and the London police didn't license prossies.

He sat on the tarnished brass bed and checked the Luger. He put his hat and the Burberry in the closet, took off his suit jacket and checked the spring mechanism of the chamois sheath strapped along the inside of his right arm. The stiletto dropped hilt-first into his palm, ready for action. Just for the hell of it, and to flex his muscles, Killmaster threw it once at the opposite wall. It pierced a square of brown paper that was stuck there with cellophane tape.

Nick recovered the stiletto and looked at the paper. It was a

picture of the Queen, torn from a magazine. He grinned. These Limeys! They love their royalty and ritual.

It was two hours before Pam came back. Nick had waited patiently, his tensions under iron control. Occasionally, he had heard high heels click down the hallway, and loud, drunken laughter. Now and again, the toilet down the hall had sobbed, groaned, and finally gurgled.

He was standing in the closet, with the room dark and his eye to the tiny crack of the door, when he heard Pam's key in the lock. She was speaking to someone. A man's voice muttered in thick accents. Nick smiled in the darkness. The trap had worked. She had found Paulus Werner.

Nick gave her just time enough to lock the door before he came rushing out of the closet. The man in the center of the room, who had been studying Pam's trim behind, whirled silently. His right hand whipped inside his light topcoat. His gun was halfway out when Nick took him— with the most terrible hold in the world!

Killmaster crashed full-face into the shorter man as though he were going to kiss him. His right arm snaked under the man's left armpit, his left hand took the man's right arm just below the elbow and forced it back. His right hand, groping now behind the man's back, caught the man's right wrist and pulled it back and around and up. Nick was much stronger, and he had a double lock on the man's right arm. He applied pressure mercilessly. The shoulder came out of the socket with a tearing sound. The man screamed horribly. Nick butted him brutally with his head to silence him. Then the man slumped in Nick's cruel embrace.

Nick dropped him to the floor and looked at the girl as he picked up the man's gun, a small Browning, and stowed it in his own pocket. He kept looking at her as he gave Werner a quick going-over. She was back against the door, her violet eyes wide with terror, one hand to her face. He hoped to Christ that she wasn't going to scream, too!

Paulus Werner was out cold. He had no other weapons. Nick went to the girl. She shrank away from him, trembling violently. He tapped her lightly across the face with his open palm, then pulled her into his arms, turning so he could keep an eye on Werner.

He spoke gently into her ear. "Come on now, Pam. Cut it out. You know you don't care what happens to a man like that. And I know, honey, I understand. It's shock. You aren't used to violence. But you've got to snap out of it. There's still a lot to do tonight."

He shook her. "Okay now?"

Pamela Martin nodded against his shoulder. "I—I think so. B—but I never saw anything like that before except in the flicks. It—"

Nick's smile was cold. "It isn't quite like the movies, is it?"

He got rid of her fast. He gave her the fifty pounds and the key to the flat in Kensington.

“Go there and wait for me,” he instructed her. “Don’t open the door, don’t even answer it, until you hear me whistle this.” He softly whistled a few notes of an old French folk tune. “Got it?”

Pam nodded. She was still badly shaken. He indicated the room with his hand. “Anything here you particularly want? Any keepsake, anything like that? If so, take it. You won’t be coming back.”

“My clothes?”

“Leave them. We’ll get you others. Okay now? Then take off.”

He checked the hall, then let her out. As she slipped past him he patted her round little rear and said, “Don’t wait up for me, honey. I might be late.”

Pam glanced back at the unconscious man on the floor. Nick saw a question forming on her lips. But she repressed it and went clicking off down the hall. Over her shoulder she threw him a soft “Ta,” the “thanks” and “goodbye” of the south country. Now there was something different about her walk, something rather jaunty. It puzzled the AXEman, but he liked it. Pam was beginning to accept matters.

When Killmaster turned back into the room and locked the door his manner changed abruptly. He surveyed his quarry, who now was beginning to moan softly, with the eye of an expert. Of a man who knew exactly what he was about.

Werner stirred as Nick bent over him. Nick hit him, lightly behind the ear with the edge of his hand. He didn’t want him conscious yet. He picked up the heavy man and tossed him onto the bed. Then he stripped him naked, tossing all his clothes in one pile, all his personal possessions in another. Werner was one of those oddballs who wore both belt and suspenders. That suited Nick fine. He spread-eagled Werner on the bed, face-up, and tied the man’s hands over his head to one of the brass rods. He used the man’s belt on his feet.

Nick carried Werner’s personal things to Pam’s battered dresser and began to go through them. As he was starting he noticed a snapshot stuck into a corner of the glass. It showed Pam, in work clothes, with a man and another girl. In the background was what appeared to be an old stone farmhouse. Pam was not smiling. Nick did, briefly, and thrust the snapshot into his pocket. It was going to explain a lot of things about Pam.

Werner had the usual things that are carried by a man who travels a lot. Plus a few that were not so usual, such as photos of young men in homosexual poses. Nick whistled softly and shrugged. It took all kinds. Pam had been right about the man.

There was a lot of money. Nearly a hundred pound notes and even

a couple of fivers. The man had two passports, one in the name of Paulus Werner, the other in the name of Hans Gottlieb. Both were heavily visaed. There was an international driver's license and various cards. Of the few other odds and ends, nothing was going to be of use to him—except the money. Nick put that in his pocket. He was going to have to buy Pam some clothes and it pleased him that Werner would pay for them.

Nick left the rest of the things on the dresser and went back to the bed. It was time for the party to start. Before he began he screwed off the heel of one of his shoes and took out a small paper seal. It was the size of a large postage stamp and bore the symbol of AXE. A cruel little hatchet. It was the only identification he was carrying. He thought it would be enough.

He took off his jacket and tossed it on a chair. He moved the new belt holster around to the small of his back—Werner just might try to grab it with his good hand—and snapped the stiletto down into his palm.

After two or three minutes Paulus Werner awoke to the new pain. His piggish little eyes opened and he stared in dawning terror at the needle blade that was pricking his jugular.

"Hello," said Nick. "Feeling better?"

Werner moaned. "Wasser—wasser! Bitte!"

"No water until we talk. And speak English!" Nick prodded him with the stiletto.

"Ach—Lie be Gott! Stop! Who are you? What do you want of me?"

"I'll ask the questions. But first I want to show you something, Paulus. Look hard." Nick held the little AXE seal close to the man's eyes.

Werner's face, already livid, now turned green. He closed his eyes and moaned. "Mein Gott! Der Amerikan-ische Mordklub!"

Nick's mouth twisted in a cold little smile. "Exactly, Paulus. The American Murder Club. And you are in a great deal of trouble, my friend. But there just might be a way out for you. And I said—speak English!" He jammed the stiletto half an inch into the man's flesh.

Werner screamed softly. "No—no! Bitte—Please! Do not hurt me again What is it you want?"

"Information," replied Nick. "And it had better be the truth."

Werner moaned softly. "But I know nothing. Nothing about anything—I am only a poor, simple German businessman."

Nick went to the foot of the bed. He put the point of the stiletto just beneath the nail of one of the man's big toes. "You are only a poor German procurer and pimp! You recruit women here and elsewhere and you take them around to various places. But you always end up in Budapest. I want to know what you do with the women when you get

them to Budapest, who takes them off your hands, how and where.”

Killmaster was an expert at reading faces, one of the very best in his business. Otherwise, he might have missed the fleeting expression of puzzlement that crossed Werner’s face, an expression that was followed immediately by one that Nick felt certain held an element of relief. It was almost as though Werner had been expecting questions of another sort, Nick thought.

Werner’s doughy face now was expressionless although there was a hint of terror in the pig eyes, and Nick knew that he had missed something. Well, it couldn’t be helped. He had to get on with it. He pushed the stiletto’s point under the toenail—just a bit.

“Aie! Don’t! Please! I will tell you everything. All right? Then you will not kill me?”

“Kill you? Of course not, Paulus. I never had any intention of killing you. Now, listen carefully, Paulus, and because I like you and admire you, I will tell you how it is going to be. You’re not going to be set free, of course. After we have our little talk, some men are going to come here to help me. They’re going to smuggle you out of England to an AXE cell in the States. You will be well treated and comfortable, and you will be able to swell that paunch a little more, while we check out the information you are going to give me. If your answers are true, you will shortly be freed. If one lie turns up—one single lie ... Well, you know the answer. Ready to go now?” Nick pressed the stiletto a little more.

Werner screeched. “I will talk! I will tell you everything.”

“I’m sure you will, old friend,” said Nick Carter.

When Paulus Werner began to talk, words flowed from him in a wild and frantic gush.

“Once again, now,” Nick said finally. “Where do you take the girls when you get to Budapest?”

“To the Hotel Hungarian Ir,” Werner repeated quickly. “It is a small place only, a cheap place. Many writers live there.”

“And then?”

“Then I get my money and leave. I do not see the girls again.”

“What happens to them?”

“I do not know, I-oyee-ee ... Liebe Gott!”

“One more he, and I will cut out the toenail,” Nick threatened icily. “You do know what happens to them, you bastard. They are used to make dirty movies in a studio somewhere near Budapest.”

“Mein Gott—you know everything! You AXE people are magicians.”

“Yes, we are. Now, where is that studio?”

“I do not know—” He uttered a gurgling, choking screech. “Stop! I really do not know. I have only heard rumors that it is in Buda, across

the river. That is all I know—I swear!”

Killmaster removed the stiletto. He realized that Werner probably did not know the exact location of the studio.

“Who pays you for the girls when you get to Budapest?” Nick asked.

“A man named Kojak, Bela Kojak. We meet elsewhere —never at the hotel—and I get my money, and I go.”

“Back for another load of girls?”

“Ja—yes. It is business only, you understand.”

Nick laughed harshly. “Yes, I understand. I also understand that you do not like girls. So why did you come here tonight?”

Werner’s flabby face fell. His thick lips trembled. “I—I was a fool! I came only because the girl promised to do some very special things for me. Also, she had agreed to go on the tour, and there were arrangements to make.”

Pam had done very well indeed. Nick was pleased. But What a dirty job for her. Perhaps he could make it up to her in some way.

“That brings up another point,” he said now. “You’ve got no girls in London. But I know that you do have a troupe stashed away somewhere. So you weren’t depending only on girls you might find in London. Where are the others?”

By this time Paulus Werner was well past the point of no-return. His moon face was glistening with sweat, and his fat mouth was drooping! He licked his wet lips. “They are waiting in Gibraltar. They come across from Tangier, Where a friend gets them for me.”

“Where are they staying in Gibraltar?”

“The Rock Hotel.”

Jab. “Ayeek! Please! I swear it is true. We must, you see. It is expensive and very swank, the Rock, but we must keep up the good appearances, you understand. The British are very correct, very suspicious.”

Kick would have guessed that Werner would keep his entourage in La Linea, a cheap hotel. But now he decided that Werner was probably speaking the truth. A man in Werner’s profession would want no complications that could be avoided—and the Spanish police could be very tough.

“They are waiting for you now, in Gibraltar, that troupe of entertainers?” Nick asked.

“Yes.”

“How many? Who are they?”

“There are only six. Matters have not gone well this trip. There is a girl band—four of them—and also two dancers. They are most unusual—Negro girls from Harlem in New York. And they are twins.” Even in his current painful situation, Werner sounded rather proud of

that bit of recruiting. He continued voluntarily now. "It is most unusual to obtain Negroes to go behind the Iron Curtain, you know. They are a great attraction there. These twins were stranded in Tangier."

Killmaster, who was not a cruel man, felt a burning rage toward this boasting pimp. He pressed on the stiletto. "They should bring a very good price in Budapest," he remarked dryly.

Werner's pig eyes were bulging.

"Now, speaking of Budapest. What do you know about a man named Michael Blackstone?" Nick went on.

"Only that he is the famous movie director that the capitalist Americans drove from their country long ago. I have never met him."

Probably true. Blackstone would not associate with scum like this.

"Did you know that he is directing those dirty films?"

"No, I have heard only rumors that he does."

"You hear a lot of rumors, Fatso," said Nick with a sneer. "And you're yelling too loudly. I told you that you could groan—because I'm a humane man—but one more loud yell, and off comes the toe."

He gave Werner a drink of water from a dirty carafe on the dresser. He didn't want the guy to pass out. Werner thirstily gulped the water, staring at Nick with a glint of hope in his pig eyes.

Water dribbled down his drooping chins. His eyes were pleading now. "That is all, please? There will be no more torture?"

Nick let him keep his crumb of comfort for the moment. It was good psychology. He wanted to spring his next question without warning.

He lit a cigarette and put it between Werner's wet, blubbery lips. The naked man, his fat, hog-like body covered with sweat, was a repulsive sight. Nick watched him without remorse. This was business, bad business but it was nearly over.

Killmaster moved away from the perverted slob on the bed, and stood thinking for a moment. He was thinking a long way ahead.

Finally, he returned to the bed and took the cigarette from Werner's mouth, stamping it out on the dirty floor. Then, very casually, he asked, "What's the name of the Chinese that this Bela Kojak reports to?"

Paulus Werner stared at Nick in terror, as if he were looking at the devil. Then Nick saw the pig eyes grow shift. The man was about to lie again. He was pretty tough for a coward.

Nick raised the stiletto and swung it idly back and forth.

"Fang Chi," said Werner quickly. "He is of the Legation there, I think."

"You know damned well he is, you fat bastard," said Nick. It made sense. A member of the Chinese Legation—the spout through which

the gold poured.

Werner nodded sullenly. "Ja—yes, I know," he admitted.

"How do you know? You deal only with Kojak."

"I was curious, you will understand. One night, after I had met Kojak, I took my leave, and then I followed him. He met that Fang Chi, and they drove away together."

"How did you know his name was Fang Chi? Did he introduce himself?"

Werner made a pitiful attempt to chuckle, "Ha—you Americans! Always with the jokes. Of course, he did not introduce himself—ha—ha ... I knew who he was already. He is well-known in. Budapest. His picture has been in the papers many times."

The man from AXE surveyed his prisoner with blank eyes. "You seem to know a lot, Werner, for a flunky. What's your second line of business?"

This time Werner managed to control his expression, but his eyes flickered. He said: "I have no second line. I am only a poor German businessman who happens to deal in women. You Americans—and also the English—are children. You do not understand such matters. You do not think it is moral. Bah! Most of my poor girls would starve to death if it were not for me."

Nick said nothing. He paced the floor, smoking a cigarette. He wanted to let Werner simmer in his sweat for a while before he went into the final round of this little farce.

After a moment, Werner said: "Your friends? They will come soon now and take me to America, ja?"

"Yes," said Nick. "Soon now. But first I want to make you a little proposition. It is all up to you. It means nothing to me. Think hard, Werner! Think of anything you might know about that movie studio in Budapest, about your troupes, about anything at all to do with this that you haven't already told me. Maybe you've forgotten something. If you can think of anything—and it proves cut—it will make a lot of difference when you get to America. I'll put in a good word for you. You'll get extra food, privileges. But hurry. My people will be here very soon."

Werner reflected. Finally, he said: "It is a rumor only, you will understand, but I have heard that the man behind that thing of the cinema, the one who has organized and who runs the entire matter, is one who is called Dr. Miljas Eros." The fat man's chuckle sounded genuine. "It is, how you say, the appropriate name, ja? If it is true, of course. I would not know."

Killmaster considered that Werner was telling what he supposed to be the truth. The man was hooked on the Stateside story and would not jeopardize his chances of receiving "privileges" by a senseless lie.

“Who is Dr. Miljas Eros?”

Werner’s answer surprised Nick. “I do not know,” said the fat pimp. “I have heard of him only in rumors, in whispers among those of kriminal tastes. I have never seen him and I have never known anyone that has seen him. Now and then his name comes up in the bar. Then there is a sudden silence before the talk begins again. You understand, Mein Herr?” At the promise of relief, at the prospect of release from this terrible American, Paulus Werner was beginning to relax.

Nick brought the water carafe to the bed. It would distract the man’s attention for the moment his action would take. It was not going to be a merciful death—that was not possible in the circumstances—but it would reduce the terror—and terror is added pain.

“You haven’t told me much about Eros,” he told the man who was about to die, “but I’ll see that it is checked out. Anything else?”

Werner, drinking greedily, looked up at Nick. Water drooled from his mouth. “One other tiling I know for certain,” said Werner. “The girls, the ones who make the movies and the other pictures, later they are sent to China and North Vietnam for the soldiers. Now that I do not like—it is not a pretty thing and—”

He saw the AXEmen’s intentions then and tried to scream. But it was too late. Nick’s big hand already was around his throat. N3 wished he could have done it in a better, a faster way. But it had not been possible. The Luger was out, because of the noise, the stiletto, because of the blood. He couldn’t risk blood on him. And there was always blood.

When Werner stopped twitching, Nick turned away without another glance and worked swiftly with a handkerchief, going over everything in the room that he had touched. Then he wiped everything that Pam might conceivably have touched. It wouldn’t do much good—he was bound to miss something—but he did it anyway. There was the bathroom, of course, and he had no time for that. He would have to ask her if her prints were on record, and if she had had sense enough to change her name when she had come to London. Pamela Martin. It sounded like her own name, all right. But maybe she hadn’t given it here.

He went through the dresser drawers. Not even a letter. Nothing with her name on it. He was turning away when a thought struck him. He cursed softly. You always forgot something: Laundry marks!

Fretting at the delay, since it would increase the risk of being stopped by the police, he made a crude laundry bag of Werner’s capacious trousers and dumped everything of Pam’s into it, along with every single stitch of clothing that had been in the room. It wasn’t a

hell of a lot. He was going to look damned funny—and suspicious—carrying a bundle made of a man's pants through the streets, but there was no help for it.

At the door, he took a last look around. He was well satisfied with the night's work. He had learned a lot and soon would learn more. And he had a plan. He also still had a hell of a lot more to do tonight.

Nick Carter went softly down the uncarpeted stairs and out into the . rain-swept confines of Pulteney Mews. The rain was slanting down hard now, flooding the winding cobbled lane. A rising wind was blowing dust bins around. A sodden cat raced, yowling, toward the door, seeking shelter from the outrageous downpour.

Nick paused at the entrance to the Mews and peered out into Pulteney Street. A few people hurried past, their heads down, their raincoats glistening in the scanty light of the few lamps. This certainly was not a bustling section of Soho.

Two corners down he found the answer to his problem. A metal bin, like a tiny cabin, stood on the corner. A sign on it said: All Old Clothes Appreciated. Thank You. London Charity Assoc. Bless You.

"And bless you, too," muttered Killmaster. He squeezed the late Paulus Werner's stuffed trousers through the slot.

He found a phone kiosk and fumbled for change. He had to call the depot and set up a crew for some fast and hard work tonight. He was going to ask for a lot in a hurry—and he would get it. He'd better. He was case officer on this deal. In fact, the world over, his authority was second only to Hawk's. And what Hawk didn't know wouldn't hurt him. Hawk had said so himself.

As Nick heard the metallic clatter of the coin in the box, he wondered if Pam would really be at the flat. She might have panicked at the last, might have run for it— With the fifty pounds.

As a voice came on the line and Nick went into the jargon of identification, he found himself hoping that she had not taken off. She would be in danger, if she had, and in any case, he owed her something. She was also a loose end. He hated loose ends.

Chapter 6

IT WAS NEARLY dawn when Killmaster left the big villa in Hampstead Heath. It had been a rough night, even for a man of his vitality. This operation, he thought as he rode in the black, chauffeur-driven car, was likely to cost AXE, and the U.S. taxpayer, about a million dollars. Nick smiled and rubbed his bleary eyes. Well, it was only money.

That million was buying quite a lot, though: jet planes, ships, the cooperation of Scotland Yard, MI 5-6, the Special Branch, Interpol, the Gibraltar authorities—those unwittingly because they had been conned—plus the enormous resources of the CIA and AXE itself. All the foregoing were legitimate operations, but in the end they would have to be accounted for to some prune-faced character with a ledger.

The “black” money was another matter. Nick had spent quite a sum tonight on bribery alone. Yet to be paid, most of it, but pledged. Agents had been bought tonight, and some obscure border guards bribed. Or soon, would be.

The black car let him out near Marylebone and Nick caught a taxi. He gave the address of his flat in Kensington. He hoped the girl was there. He had a need for her now. Professionally—and perhaps otherwise. He had never been much for tarts, but you could not yet call Pam a tart. She hardly had begun. He wondered just how many men she had had in her brief career as a scarlet woman. He laughed at the old-fashioned phrase. It was something that Hawk might have used.

The old man had come through for him tonight, in a rather ghostly way. No personal contact. Four words from a radio-teleprinter:

Blackstone villa in Vac.

As the taxi drew to the curb a couple of blocks from the flat, Nick paid the fare and found himself thinking that it would be ironic were he, by some wild mischance, to be tagged for the killing of Werner. It would nullify everything. All that money would be wasted. One thing the Limeys wouldn't cooperate with was murder.

Not much chance of that, though. Paulus Werner's passports—both of them—were in the labs back at the Heath this very moment. Spare passports always came in handy. Nick grinned as he walked toward the flat. The boys at the Yard might have a little trouble. Fat Boy might be on their morgue list of unidentified corpses for some time.

Nick turned into Princes Gate, his mind racing. A million dollars spent tonight. Wires humming, computers flashing, air waves throbbing. Men yanked out of bed in the midst of sleep or copulation.

Lies told and truths concealed, or vice-versa. All to get one man with a gun into Hungary.

Nick shrugged as he went up the stairs to his flat. He hoped it was going to pay off. If it didn't, it would not matter to him. Nothing would, then.

Pam must have waiting to hear his step. He had hardly finished whistling the first bars of the French song when the door opened. "Nate! You've been so long. I was getting terribly worried."

"Don't you mean scared?" he asked with a wry smile as he skimmed his hat toward a sofa and tugged off his topcoat. He saw her look at them, then glance at his suit.

"You've changed clothes!" she cried in astonishment. "You looked like a spiv before—now you look like a gentleman."

"Thank you. I always try to be."

"Except when you're knocking people about?" She went to the sofa and huddled on it. She picked up his hat and stroked it with a finger. She had put on his robe and it covered her like a tent, concealing her lovely, thin little body. He noticed that, she had fixed her hair and put on a touch of lipstick.

Nick went to the sofa and pulled her from it. He saw that she was naked beneath his robe. He put his arm around her tiny waist and patted her firm little rear. "Fix me a drink, Pam. Then come here. We've got to have a serious talk, you and I."

When she came back, she handed him the drink and settled on the sofa beside him. She studied Nick. "You killed him, didn't you?" she said tremulously.

Killmaster had been wondering about this moment. Now he decided that it was as good a time as any to find out how much guts she had. If she went with him, she was going to need plenty.

"I had to," he admitted. "There was no other way. It couldn't be helped, believe me."

The big violet eyes regarded him coolly. Her skin was so smooth and white. Her hair, now that it had been dried and combed, was dark and lustrous. Nick wondered if any of the men who had bought her had known what they were getting.

Finally, she said: "That means I'm mixed up in a murder."

Nick nodded somberly. "Technically; yes. However, it doesn't necessarily mean trouble. But right now, tell me—is Pamela Martin your real name?"

"Pamela is, but not Martin. I'm not that much of a goose. My real name is Haworth."

"Have your fingerprints ever been taken in this country?"

"Yes. For my military service. But I never was called."

There was no help for that. Probably, it didn't matter. London, and

the world, were both big places, and Pamela Haworth was about to disappear from both—if she would play ball.

Nick tenderly put his big arm around her slim shoulders. “Tell me—is that story you told me really true? About running away from the farm and coming up here, to make your fortune as a prostitute?”

She would not look at him. Nick saw her cheeks and the back of her neck grow pink. “It—it was almost true. I was going to do it. Only I couldn’t—not when it came right down to it. I stalled until all my money ran out. Oh, I did take one old man home but he couldn’t do anything. I was scared to death and I guess he saw that. He paid me anyway. I think he was laughing at me and feeling sorry for me at the same time.”

“How about Paulus Werner?” Nick asked gently.

“Ugh! I really never had any intention of going with him. But I thought perhaps I could get a meal out of him. After that, I was going to ditch him. Only he got nasty.”

Nick believed her. She was something of a nut, of course, but a lovely little nut, and perhaps not too bright. However, sometimes that helped—when they weren’t too bright. Nick began to wonder: he had the authority to recruit for AXE, an authority that he seldom used. Now, there might be a permanent niche for her. But that would have to wait.

“How about me? Were you really going to go with me?” Nick asked.

“Oh, yes!” She raised her face and clung to him. “But not just for the money. I was frightened and lonely and— and I liked you from the very first.”

Nick kissed her then.

Pamela had a delightfully soft little tongue, and she knew how to use it. When they broke the kiss, Nick said: “Do all Dorset girls kiss like that?”

“How should I know? But we’re not all bumpkins, you know.” Her violet eyes were closed as she sought out his mouth again. “Nate! Oh, Nate darling. I think I’m in love with you. And that does make me a fool, doesn’t it?”

Killmaster was enjoying himself. In his rare philosophical moods he sometimes thought that it was such moments, snatched between death and dirt and peril, that made the whole caper worthwhile.

Then he pushed her away. “Fine. So you’re in love with me. But you’ll have to change your profession, of course.”

“I already have changed it.”

“Would you like a new one? For now, it would be temporary, but it pays well. And it might turn out to be permanent.”

Pam was stroking his cheek with her fingers. “Are. you really

offering me a job?" she asked in astonishment.

"Of sorts. And remember: I said it's temporary." Could be too damned temporary, he thought grimly. He was going to take this kid into danger, if she accepted, because she could be of enormous help. He was, if matters worked out, going to be the first agent to take his "wife" along on a mission!

Nick kissed her, then pulled the robe around her and fastened it. "You are not only a horrible brute," she whispered, "but you are also inhuman. Where do you get such self-control?"

"Later," said Nick. "Later, I'll show you something about self-control. Right now, let's talk about the work."

"All right, if we must. Will I have to be some sort of spy?" She was playing with his ear.

This kid, Nick thought with some surprise, could turn out to be smarter than she looks or acts.

"You listen," he told her. "Let go of my ear now, and just sit there and listen—and listen hard. And think hard. Because once you're in this thing, and we're past the point of no-return—well, it will be just that: No turning back!"

"It's dangerous, v/hat we're going to do?"

"I said listen! Yes, it's dangerous, damned dangerous. You can get killed very easily. And you'll only be doing it for money, not for a cause or anything like that—and you'll be doing it without really knowing what it's all about. Because I won't tell you. I can't tell you. I'll give you the script a line at a time and that's the way you'll have to play it. You'll obey orders and ask no questions. And when we're working there will be nothing between us but business, strictly business."

"That's the part I don't like."

"You're a forward wench, but I like you. Now I'm going to have another drink and take a shower. In the meantime, think hard. If you decide to come in with me, we've got a difficult day ahead of us. But I'll give you all the dope as we go along."

As he turned on the shower and began to soap up, he thought it might just work out. He had lied to Pam a bit, of course, lied by omission because he hadn't yet told her all the facts. One, that she might have to spend some time in a Hungarian prison. He didn't think they would harm her, even if worse came to worse, though she would sure as hell get the full treatment. The AVO, or whatever the hell they called themselves now, was going to take a lot of convincing of her innocence. But innocent she would be. Because he wasn't going to tell her a damned thing that she didn't absolutely have to know.

Killmaster admitted that sometimes he had to be something of a rat. But you had to use people, even people you liked. If this thing

came off, and they both got out of it, he would see to it that Hawk worked the angles and got Pam into the States. Maybe even a permanent job with AXE.

Nick was so busy pacifying his conscience that he did not hear the bathroom door open. Then she was slipping beneath the shower with him, taking the soap from his hands. "Let me do that, Nate."

They-kissed beneath the warm shower, her tongue stinging his mouth like a small red serpent. Nick, with the prospect of danger looming again, was quite as caught up as she was. It was a crazy, cruel world, and a lot of nutty things kept happening, and this was one of them. That was the way it was. He had to accept it.

Pam blew water into his face. "I've decided to do it," she said. "Take the job. When do we start?"

"I am a most conscientious man," said Nick slowly. "I always try to do my duty. But duty can wait."

Chapter 7

AS THE TRAIN rolled out of Vienna toward the Hungarian border, Nick and Pamela went over their story once again. They were in the car ahead of the troupe of entertainers. The troupe—the girl band had turned out to be four South American girls who spoke only Spanish—had been flown in from Gibraltar and had met Nick in Vienna.

It was the twin Negro girls who had especially impressed Nick. He had ranged far and wide and had seen much, but he had never seen anything like those girls. They were very dark-skinned, but they had dyed their hair a glaring platinum. Their fingernails were painted silver. The effect was most striking.

Nick had not had much to do with the troupe. That was part of Pam's job. She was their chaperone and manager. But all six of her charges looked older than she did.

There was very little time now. Nick knew he could not assume that Paulus Werner had been working alone in London—someone had killed that CIA man, emasculated him and then had sent the grisly results to Boynton. But Nick did not think it had been Werner. So when the body was found—there had been nothing in the papers before they left London, but there soon would be—a description would be published and somebody was going to start investigating,

Now Pam said: "I'm beginning to get a little frightened, Nick." He had given her Nick in exchange for Nate, but little else.

"That's good," he said. "Up to a point, fear keeps people alive sometimes. But go on—run through it again." He glanced around casually. They had the dingy car almost to themselves. Not many people were going to Hungary these days.

"And it's you, too, Nick. You upset me a little," she added, studying him with a critical eye. "I can't believe you're the same person."

"Cut it out, Pam! Run through it again. We'll be at the border before long." He was a little snappish, a trifle on edge. He was heading into the final stages of a hell mission, a find-and-destroy effort, and he had organized the whole thing virtually overnight. All responsibility for failure or success was on his shoulders. All lives involved were his responsibility. He observed the changes in Pam. She had filled out a little in a short time, and now, with her wholesome Dorset complexion and her sensible shoes and tweeds she was the very picture of the devoted young British wife.

"You're Jacob Werner," Pam said obediently. "I'm your wife. I met you in Bournemouth, on holiday, about a year ago. We fell in love and

got married about six weeks later. We live in London now, and you're a clerk at Barney and Sons, wine merchants. Right, so far?"

"It should be," Nick said sharply. "You've only been over it about a thousand times. But it's good. How old are you?"

"My real age, twenty-two. My maiden name was Haworth and I'm from Dorset. Everything about me is genuine. I love you and I came along on this trip because you wanted me to come, and because it was a chance for an unusual vacation. We hadn't taken ours yet. We're making the trip because your cousin got into some trouble and asked you to help him out"

"Good. And remember, if I'm in any trouble, or have been up to something I shouldn't, you don't know a thing about it." Nick was trying to protect her as much as he could. All she had to do was keep her mouth shut and stick to her story, and she should be all right. She simply was a bewildered young English wife, who was much younger than her husband, and didn't really know too much about his business.

"Now about me," Nick prompted. "Just what I've told you, of course, during our brief marriage."

"You're a naturalized British subject. You're thirty-five. You came to England from Germany about ten years ago and worked hard to lose your accent. Mostly, you have. You have no family. Nearly all of them were killed in the bombings during the war. The only relative you have left is Paulus Werner, a cousin. He is Older than you, and he is the one who came to you in London and said he was in trouble."

Killmaster—at present he looked like anyone else in the world but Killmaster—patted his "wife's" shapely knee. "What sort of trouble?"

Pam wrinkled her brow. Nick noticed that her violet eyes were overly bright and her face was taut and paler than usual now. The kid was running scared.

"I'm a little vague about that," Pam replied. "You talked alone with your cousin, while I fixed dinner, and when you explained it to me I didn't really understand. But it had something to do with the police. They had taken up your cousin's passport and he couldn't leave the country. And he stood to lose a lot of money because of it. There was something about a theatrical troupe that he had to take to Budapest. But your passport was all right, and the police couldn't stop you, so he asked you to help him. He would pay you well. And it would make a nice little vacation for his young cousin and his lieblich wife. All very unusual, since very few people get behind the Iron Curtain these days."

"Damned few want to," muttered Nick. The trainmaster came through, and he surrendered their tickets. When the man had gone, he asked, "And where is my dear cousin now?"

“Burning in hell, I hope!” Pam said harshly.

Nick laughed. “He probably is. But the right answer, please. Time’s a-wasting.” At Nick’s laugh, someone several seats ahead had turned to stare at him. They were about to enter Hungary, and that was no laughing matter.

“I’m not really sure,” Pam replied dutifully. “After all the arrangements were made, Cousin Paulus disappeared. But I think that maybe he is in jail in England.”

“You think right,” agreed Nick. “That’s the story we’ve planted and the British police are cooperating. Now, where are we going to Budapest and what’s the setup? Then we’ll be finished with rehearsal.”

Pam nuzzled him. “Oh, God, Nick—I am getting shaky. Do you really think we can do it?”

He gave her a look that was cold even through the thick horn-rimmed glasses he was wearing. “Remember what I told you? No backing down now. What’s the setup?”

“Our troupe is playing a month’s engagement at the Cafe Molnar. We’re staying at the Hotel Hungarian Ir. It will probably have bedbugs and cockroaches.”

“Sure to have,” said Nick emphatically. He looked around. No one was watching them. He smiled at Pam, then ran a hand under her demure tweed skirt.

“Nick! Here?” Pam was shocked.

“I’m a lecherous kid. Actually, it’s a sort of goodbye, honey. We aren’t going to have much time at the hotel. Do you understand that? Of course you do. I’m going to have to cut out fast.”

“I know—and leave me holding the bag.”

“Cut it out. You signed on for this cruise.”

She leaned against him. “Will they do anything very terrible to me, Nick? If things go badly and we get caught, I mean.”

“You are going to get caught! At least, you’re the one who’s going to have to answer the questions. That’s the whole idea—to give me time to work. But keep your nerve and stick to your story, and you’ll be all right. Remember: I got you into this and I’ll get you out of it. Now, go act like a chaperone, or a manager, or something. Got all your papers with you? And the troupe’s?”

“In my purse.”

“Right. If you’re still back there when we get to the border, just play it cool. The fix is in.”

I hope! he thought when Pam had gone. God knew it had cost AXE enough money, money spent in high places to enable an easy border crossing. That was why he had played it this way, with the elaborate cover of the young-wife bit. He might have made it by himself—through the new defensive setup the Hungarians had. CIA had shot the

latest on that to London. Nick leaned back in his seat and fumbled for his pipe. No cigarettes for a while. He could see the report as it must have come into the depot, the "House," out in Hampstead Heath that night.

Old mines have been removed, and a better field of Vision established—wide strip of soil to show footprints—behind this a 900-foot zone that is heavily guarded and mined—watchtowers with machine guns and sharpshooters, manned around the clock—towers have telephonic and radio communication—dogs—behind that a system of six electric fences with signal installations—directly behind the last zone is a street running parallel which is patrolled, night and day by armed guards in cars and on motorcycles.

Yes, Nick thought. He might have made it. And one lucky bullet might have gotten him and ended any chance of destroying this filthy business for a long time. The CIA had tried and failed—with ghastly results: the agony of a man packed in a box. AXE had the ball now and, utterly without false pride, Nick knew that he was the best man to cany it.

They had reached the border now. N3, in his rumpled suit and cheap topcoat, with a ginger moustache and flecks of gray in his hair, peered down the aisle and waited to see if the fix was really in. He was in light disguise. Nothing that could come off or wash out. Every part of it was his own, but everything had been subtly altered. It was a posture disguise as much as anything—he pushed his belly out and let his shoulders droop. And the heavy glasses did wonders for his face. He was Jacob Werner, naturalized British subject, helping out his cousin Paulus, who at the moment was burning in hell.

The door of the vestibule slammed open, and there was a mutter of harsh voices and the familiar stamp of hobnailed boots. Two brown-uniformed guards with Sten guns slung around their shoulders appeared at the head of the aisle. Behind them an officer gave a curt order in Hungarian.

Everybody out for customs and security inspection! All baggage must be produced!

Nick was reaching for the heavy bags on the rack overhead when he became conscious of the officer at his elbow. In coarse English, the man asked, "Your name, please?"

N3 said in his best British accent touched with German—"Werner. Jacob Werner. I am traveling with a troupe of entertainers. We are going to Budapest and—"

"Your passport, please!" the officer interrupted gruffly.

Nick handed the document to the officer. It Was genuine, of course, as was Pam's. Her Majesty's Government had cooperated fully. Only the visas were false—and those were the products of the most

skillful forgers in the profession.

The officer riffled through the passport then handed it back to Nick.

"It will not be necessary for you to take your baggage outside, Herr Werner. You. and your wife may remain in the car."

"My wife is in another car. I—"

The officer nodded curtly and moved away. Nick sank back into his seat, concealing a smile beneath the fake ginger moustache that Makeup had guaranteed for six months. The fix was in, all right. Someone, a high official in just the right spot, had been "persuaded." Orders had been given—discreet orders.

Nick, staring out the window at the shabby station, made an educated guess at the sum involved. He had given the initial order that night in London, but then the matter had left his hands. But . someone had been very efficient and had handled a complex matter well and quickly. The main problem had been to convince the official that no treason or treachery against the State, was involved. That had been done. N3, with his intimate knowledge of such matters, guessed the price to be around a hundred thousand dollars. Eventually, some of it would trickle down to the border guards.

Pam came back after the train had slid across the border and begun the run to Budapest. She sank down beside Nick and pulled her skirt over her knees. "It wasn't so bad," she reported. "He hardly glanced at our passports."

"When the fix is in," Nick told her, "it looks easy. When the fix slips, it can get pretty rough."

It was late afternoon when the train stopped in the Pest station. Nick and Pam rounded up their little group. The South American girls chattered like magpies, attracting a great deal of attention. They made for Parliament Square, with Nick keeping a careful eye on the two porters who were carrying some of the luggage and the band instruments. If anything happened to the drum, he would be in deep trouble.

The porters, who could not keep their eyes off the two attractive Negro dancers, Duri and Reni, finally managed to round up a couple of taxis. They all piled in. Nick stayed with the drum. That meant he was with the South American girls, who eyed him saucily and chattered among themselves. They were all a little fat and not very pretty. Nick wondered how they would look in the dirty pictures, if he failed to bring this mission off.

The Hotel Hungarian Ir turned out to be near the Gellert Hill section. Nick did not pay much attention to the city as they drove, but from what he saw, things had improved greatly since he had been here last. Then, the scars of war had been everywhere, and the streets

filled with Russian soldiers.

As they pulled up before the hotel, a shabby edifice of gray brick, N3 thought, This is where the egg hits the fan! This was the part he had not told Pam about. He had not dared to try to make reservations for fear of warning Bela Kojak. At first, he had been willing to take that chance, had been willing to risk everything for five minutes alone with Kojak—with Luger and stiletto. But then Hawk had come through with his four words over the radio-teleprinter, and everything had changed abruptly. The last man in the world he wanted to see, at the moment, was Bela Kojak. The man would know about the arrival of the troupe soon enough. Killmaster had to be on his way by that time.

There was general confusion, at first, but not as bad as Nick had expected. The manager spoke German, of a sort, and obviously the arrival of troupes of girls was not a novelty at the Hotel Hungarian Ir. But they were not expected! That was the hitch. There had not been the usual telegram from the Herr Paulus Werner—where was the other Herr Werner? And one was not sure that rooms Were available.

For a large sum of forints it appeared that rooms were available, after all, and a sweating Nick Carter went up in the ancient, rickety, open-cage lift with the band instruments. He watched them being piled into a room where two of the band girls would be sleeping.

He discovered Pam in the hall a minute later. She was talking to the Negro girl, Reni, who spoke enough German to act as interpreter. Nick pulled Pam away.

“This is it,” he told her. “Get them all together in your room for a talk. Say anything—I don’t give a damn—but get them away from those band instruments. I’ve got to have a minute alone in there.”

She did not question him at all, and he put it down to her credit. Pam was working out. He hoped they wouldn’t be too rough with her.

Five minutes later he was in the room. He locked the door behind him and crossed to the drum, taking out his pocket knife. He lifted the drum and shook it. Nothing rattled. The AXEmen in Gibraltar had done a good job, and on very short notice.

N3 slit the drumhead, reached in, and felt around. These weapons were strange, but they would have to do. It would have been insane to try to cross the border with weapons on him, or in the luggage, fix or not. A casual search would have blown everything.

Nick brought out a Colt .45 Army automatic. After his Luger, the heavy thing felt like it needed wheels. There were three spare clips, brass knuckles with spikes, and a short-bladed trench knife with a brass-knuckle hilt. That was all he had ordered.

His searching fingers encountered something else that felt smooth and glassy. What the hell? The thing was stuck to the inside of the

drum. Nick pulled it loose.

It was a small glassine packet containing a white powder. Nick ripped it open and tasted it, knowing what he was going to find.

He was wrong! He was goddamned wrong! It wasn't heroin. It was sugar, milk sugar! Figure it?

There was no time now. He ran his hand in and around the drum once more, just to check, and found that the interior was practically papered with the little glassine packets.

Minutes later, Nick went to the door and peered out. He had stowed away the arsenal as best he could and he would be all right unless he was stopped for a search. If that happened, he was dead, anyway.

The hall was empty. Nick casually went down the stairs and through the lobby. No one paid any attention to him. The desk was busy. He had not turned in his passport, nor filled out his police form, and if they called him on it now there would be hell to pay.

Killmaster walked out the door of the Hotel Hungarian Ir and nobody called him. He quickly turned to his right and walked down a sloping street. It was beginning to shade into dusk now, the sky mackerelered and starting to pick up the industrial glare of Pest. He went on down the slope, watching the tall stacks belching oily smoke. They could do with a little smoke abatement here, too, N3 thought. He chuckled to himself now. The worst was over—the tension of waiting. Now it would begin. This was what he had been born for, no matter how much he told himself he hated it. Action! Now, Killmaster was at work, one man on his own with only his hands and a few primitive weapons. But they would be enough.

He reached the bottom of the street and headed for the dock section along the Danube. He strolled unhurriedly, without a suspicion of furtiveness, nodding politely to passersby. This was the way he had planned it, a few hours of grace with valid papers in his pocket.

It had taken a lot of planning, money and brainwork to spring him loose for these few hours. He couldn't afford to waste a minute of them.

Killmaster almost started to whistle the little French tune he liked so much. He stopped himself in time. Jacob Werner wasn't much of a whistler.

Chapter 8

THOSE WORDS, ticking off the printer, had altered Killmaster's whole plan. Vac was a town about 30 kilometers north of Budapest.

Since he was not on the lam—at least, not yet—Nick could play the role of tourist to the hilt. He shambled along the riverfront, peering through his thick glasses, tripping over things, shoulders drooping and belly pushed out, smiling at people and trying to find someone who spoke German or English. That was for the benefit of the workmen and bargemen who were going off work.

His inquiries led Nick to a small boat basin and a grizzled old man called Josef. He was the owner of an ancient double-ender. Yes, he would take the gentleman up to Vac, if his old engine would bear the strain, for 500 forints. Yes, it was expensive. But it was dark now and they would have to go very slowly—his single light was poor—and all that would take time. The gentleman agreed.

Good. The gentleman had papers, then? One had to be careful.

Killmaster stretched out on a hard bunk in the tiny cabin of the old tub as it chugged slowly upstream. He wondered how much time he had. Pam would give him every minute she could, naturally, but to protect herself she would have to call the police when he did not show up 'in a few hours. That was the ploy. She was to stall as long as possible, then call in the police and stage the worried-wife bit. Then, taking red tape and language difficulties, into consideration, plus the usual police foul-up, he might gain a few hours more.

But there was more to it than that. Nick grinned humorlessly in the darkness of the oil-stinking little cabin. There was Bela Kojak. The man naturally would have a pipeline to the hotel. He would hear about the new shipment of girls immediately. He might be a little worried. New girls in and no call from his old pal, Werner.

He might be worried about something else, too. Nick reached into his pocket and took out the glassine envelope. He tasted it again and smiled wryly. Milk sugar. They had to be using it to cut heroin! It made sense. In a country like this, milk sugar would be hard to get. Like most other things it would be in short supply, and whoever was running the dope in couldn't risk attracting attention by buying up too much. So the smart bastards ran the sugar in, too.

Nick went to the compamonway and peered back. He could see the old man at the wheel, his stubby pipe glowing in the wind. Nick returned to the bunk and began to field-strip the Colt, working by touch in the dark as he had so many times before. When he finished that, he tested the feeder springs in the clips. This type of Colt jammed

easily. He was only going to get one shot with this deal.

As he worked he sorted things out in his mind. The heroin, of course, accounted for the odd expression on Paulus Werner's fat face, and the relief when Nick did not question him about it. Werner would have figured that if Nick or AXE knew about the heroin, then the Hungarians would know, also. Heroin was a shooting offense in Hungary.

Killmaster paid a small and grudging tribute to the Chinese Reds: running smut out of the country and horse in! It had to be the Chinese, of course. Every little bit helps, as Hawk had said in the office that day. The two Commie giants were on the outs. What was easier than to feed in a little heroin, try to build up a few habits? There was also the matter of personal profit. Who was making it? Bela Kojak? Fang Chi of the Chinese Legation? The mysterious Dr. Miljas Eros? Maybe even Blackstone himself and his wife. Or Mona Manning? No. Not Mona. She probably needed it, all right, if she was around the bend, but she wouldn't be pushing it.

Killmaster shrugged. It was a secondary puzzle. He didn't give a damn. He tried to make a battle plan, to decide in what order to kill them, then gave it up. Battle plans always went wrong, anyway. He was just going to have to play it by ear.

He went to the companionway again and called to the old man. "Wake me just before you get to Vac," he ordered.

Nick went back to the bunk and was asleep in seconds.

It was after midnight when the old man put him ashore on a stone jetty. The town of Vac didn't seem to be much. But there certainly would be a cop or two around. Nick walked up a cobbled street that the old gaffer had said would take him to the town square. There was a taxi around someplace, the old man had added. If it was running.

Light splashed on the cobbles ahead of him and he heard laughter and singing. Some stringed instrument was being whanged. Nick grinned. Not even Socialism could subdue a-Magyar peasant's love of music. He approached the tavern cautiously and peered through leaded diamond panes. There they were. Two cops. They were drinking wine and applauding, as a couple of men stomped around in a wild dance.

Nick crossed the street and went oh, adequately obscured in the shadows. He found the square a couple of blocks up the hill. There was a beat-up old Zis sedan parked down a way, in front of a chemist's shop. Nick walked toward it.

A young man was asleep in the front seat of the Zis, a leather cap over his eyes. Nick shook him awake, falling back into his role of visiting fireman. There was no time to waste so he spoke Hungarian.

"Good evening. Can you take me out to the villa of Mr.

Blackstone?"

"Eh? Who?" The driver rubbed, sleep from his eyes, then stared at Nick suspiciously.

"Mr. Blackstone, the famous movie director. But perhaps you do not know him. I am sorry. I will try—"

"Of course, I know him! Well, I know of him. Everyone in Vac knows of him. But who are you? Where in the name of the devil did you come from?"

Nick lit his pipe, so the man could see his face, the vapid face of one Jacob Werner. He was leaving a trail a mile wide now but there was no help for it.

"You have papers?" the driver inquired in a cautious, low voice. "Your business is legitimate?"

Nick sighed loudly. "Of course, I have papers. Would I be wandering around in the middle of the night without papers? I happen to be an old friend of Mr. Blackstone, a very old friend, and I want to surprise him. I am going to be in Hungary only for a short time. Can you take me? I have come all the way from Budapest" He took a thick wad of forints from his pocket. "How much will the fare be? Since it is late, I expect to be charged extra."

"You have checked in with the police?" asked the driver.

"Not yet. They are drinking in the tavern down the hill. X did not wish to disturb them. Perhaps we could, walk down and see them now." Nick started to put the wad of forints back into his pocket.

The driver hesitated, torn between greed and fear. Nick could practically read his thoughts: If there was anything wrong about this crazy stranger, and the police arrested him, there went the fare—and the extra fare!. Better to take him now and report him later—if at all.

"Get in," the driver snapped.

They drove for about fifteen minutes along a narrow, metaled road, going south and skirting the Danube. Nick learned from the driver that Blackstone lived in a very fine villa on a hill overlooking the river. A driveway led to the villa.

"Let me out at the driveway," ordered Nick. "I will walk up and surprise my friend. I have not seen him for many years, you see. He does not even dream that I am within a thousand miles of here."

The driver nodded.

A few minutes later, he let Nick out at the foot of a graveled driveway. Nick paid and tipped generously. Then he watched the old Zis rattle away down the road. Maybe the man would report to the police, maybe not. Later, it wouldn't matter. In fact, it would be a help, in case the locals didn't know what was going on around the Villa Blackstone. They could move in and clean any crumbs that Nick might miss.

Wind soughed through the tall pines and slim white birches bordering the road. Nick crossed the road, his steps loud on the metal. Michael Blackstone had plenty of privacy, Nick couldn't even see the villa from here.

A thin rind of moon had broken through the overcast now to shed just enough light to enable Nick to see the stone steps which led from the road down to the Danube. There, a large cabin cruiser was secured alongside a pier that juttred into the river. Nick could hear the soft creak of the cruiser as she bumped against her fenders. She was a big job, long and rakish, with a flying bridge. She might, the AXEman thought, afford a possible way out later—if there was going to be a way out.

He returned to the other side of the road and, avoiding the gravel, began to move up the driveway. The hill was overgrown with conifers, white birches, and beeches, and the undergrowth was thick. But near the drive a grassy verge was fairly clear.

Nick's chief worry now was dogs.

There did not appear to be any dogs. So far, no car had passed on the road below, and he had not heard a sound or seen a light. If there were other villas close by, there was no evidence of them. N3 began to wonder if the Blackstones were away. Th'at would fix up everything!

The moon had disappeared into the overcast. Killmaster paused in a clearing, waited for the moon to show again, then took a small can of blacking from his pocket. He took off his hat, squatted behind a bush, and began to apply the stuff to his face. It was calculated to be a part of the terror he intended to instill in Blackstone. He planned to wait a couple of hours, until just before dawn when a man is most vulnerable. Then he would steal into the bedroom and awaken Blackstone to the sight of a black-faced demon from hell. It took a damned brave man to resist under such circumstances, and Nick did not think Michael Blackstone would be that brave.

He started cautiously up the hill again. After a hundred yards he heard some unexpected sounds. He stopped in puzzlement, as the sounds of music and loud, joyous laughter came to him. The AXEman cursed under his breath. They were having a goddamned party up there! But why no lights?

A minute later, he found out. On either side of the drive, and running back from it for about a hundred yards, a tall stockade had been built. Nick had almost run into it. He felt it with his fingers, and found that it was constructed of withe, and was the type .of fence that people put around their swimming pools for privacy. His grin came, cold as the moonlight. The Blackstones would need privacy, all right. This fence was a good twenty feet high and effectively shielded the villa from the road.

Nick slipped around the fence, quietly tiptoed across the gravel, and ducked back into the undergrowth. Now he could see the lights.

The joint was swinging!

Killmaster circled the driveway to his right and came in from the side. The lights were powerful. They sent stray fingers of brilliance. As he drew closer he dropped lightly to the ground and began to worm his way over damp, newly fallen leaves. The topcoat was an encumbrance now. He stood up, transferred the contents of its pockets to his suit jacket, and discarded the garment. Then he went on as before.

Nick now could see that the villa was built on a massive rock foundation. The drive twisted and turned like a white snake and led to a large, asphalted parking space. Beyond it, set into the rough rock, Nick saw four garage doors. Two of them were open.

There were a couple of large vehicles in the parking zone. They looked like trucks. But they weren't trucks, Nick saw. They were prison vans! He could see the glint of wire mesh in the glass of the rear door.

All the light and noise was coming from the lower level of the house. It was no mere split-level dwelling. Actually it was a double house.

Nick watched the parking lot for five minutes. Nothing moved there. There was no one near the trucks. The upper half of the villa was dark, but the lower half was pulsing with music and laughter, the delightful laughter of girls. Now that he was closer, Nick detected a weird note of frenzy in the laughter. It was too shrill, even approaching a scream.

Killmaster cocked an ear. It was a scream! Suddenly cut off, it was lost immediately in a new surge of music.

Killmaster studied the layout carefully. There was a narrow ledge of rock over the garage doors. If he could reach it, he would be able to see into one of the barred windows. It would mean exposing himself briefly when he crossed the open parking area, but he could see no way around it. Still, he hesitated. He had only one chance and even now time was running out. If he goofed, it would all be over. But when the devil drove ...

Nick braced himself, then raced soundlessly across the parking space, carrying the Colt in his right hand and the trench knife in his left, poised for action.

When he reached the rough outcropping of rock beside the garage, he shoved the Colt into his belt and slipped the trench knife between his teeth. Then he went up the rough surface with the agility of a monkey.

The ledge was very narrow, less than a foot wide. But it was

enough for Nick Carter. He skittered along it toward the nearest window.

Now, the music was deafening and the girls' laughter sounded hysterical.

Cautiously, Killmaster peered in at the window. He saw a long, narrow ballroom with a highly polished floor. Couples were dancing, whirling and waltzing, some doing the frug or monkey, a few just walking or holding each other. All the dancers were girls and they all wore the same costume! A tiny black bra cut below the nipples, a short brief or panty-girdle with long garters attached to dark stockings. Every one of the girls wore extremely high heels—narrow, four-inch spikes.

The music was coming from a giant jukebox at the far end of the hall. There was a long refectory table covered with bottles, glasses, and big piles of sandwiches. Beyond the table, mounted on a platform, was a large movie camera. A man sat near it in a canvas chair. He was the only man in the room, and he looked bored and tired. As Nick watched, the man left his chair to make an adjustment on the camera. He yawned as he sat down again.

Suddenly, one of the girls screamed. Nick swung around and saw a big woman in black with a whip. The girl who had screamed, a thin-legged blonde, whimpered and fell to the glistening floor. The big woman gestured with the whip. The girl quickly arose, looked wildly around for a partner, but found none. So she began to tap dance in a stumbling manner. It seemed to be enough for the big woman. She smiled and thrust her whip back into her broad belt.

Killmaster studied the Amazonian "matron" while he considered the sickening ramifications of the setup. This, obviously, was the end of the line for Paulus Werner's girls, until they were used up and shipped on to China or North Vietnam. Meantime, the bastards were getting all the mileage possible out of them. He observed the camera again. They must be shooting background stuff tonight, footage for orgy scenes, perhaps.

Nick turned his eyes to the Amazon. She must weigh about two hundred pounds. She had a face like a platter of dough, breasts like basketballs. Her black dress was buttoned tightly around her thick neck and reached to her gunboat shoes. The black belt was fastened around her bulging midriff with a shiny silver buckle. The whip at her side was short-handled, with a plaited leather lash.

A couple of the girls danced past Nick, just below the window. Then his eye was caught by something that seemed out of place even in this obscene mess. He stared in disbelief. One of the girls was Negro. Her hair was dyed a bright platinum and her fingernails were silver. She wore a white bra and a white panty-girdle. She was

dancing with her eyes closed in apparent contentment, clutching her partner tightly.

She was one of the twins! Doped, Nick guessed. But how in the hell...

The Negro girl's partner caught his eye.

It was Pam.

Chapter 9

SOMEONE HAD ACTED fast—too damned fast! Faster than Nick had thought possible. Pam had never had a chance to put their plan into operation, or to call the police. Someone else had gotten there first, someone who had also had a plan and had had the power and resources to put it into effect. Bela Kojak? Nick had gotten the idea from the fat man that Kojak was pretty small potatoes. He was bigger than Werner, but still small-time. So who? Who had the power, the nerve and resources, to round up the troupe and Pam, load them into the prison vans, and drive them up. here from Budapest while Nick was slowly chugging up the river in the old double-enders?

A whistle shrieked inside the room. The jukebox slowly ground into silence. The Amazon, a silver whistle in her blubbery lips, was lining the girls up in single file. They stood listlessly, now that the music was gone. The cameraman was putting a canvas hood over his machine. Apparently, the Devil's Ballroom was closing for the night.

The Amazon now opened a door and began nudging the girls through it with her whip. Nick watched her fat lips move as she counted them. Pamela went just as docilely as the rest. He was sure that they all were drugged. Probably, they were kept drugged as long as they were here.

Nick's gaze followed Pam as. she went through the door, turned left, and moved downward. There was another level below this, where there must be rooms, or cells, where the girls were kept confined when not working.

Pam was the last one in line. The brutish woman in black closed the door behind the girl. The cameraman had disappeared through another door. A moment later, the lights flicked out.

Killmaster tapped the glass thoughtfully. The bars were on the other side of the glass. It was no good, anyway. This was a dead end now. He backed off down the ledge, the trench knife still in his teeth, and descended again to the tarmac. Now that the lights in the ballroom were out it was dark again.

Then suddenly a light went on in the rear of the garage. Nick heard voices, male voices.

Soundlessly, he ghosted into the garage in a crouch, skirting a car that looked like a Lincoln. He headed toward the light and the voices.

A flight of stairs descended transversely across the rear wall of the garage. Nick moved with catlike stealth up the stairs. He could make out words now, in peasant Hungarian. Of course. They were servants. Naturally, Blackstone would have servants. The servants' quarters

must be located up here, entered either through the house or the garage. Nick still had the trench knife in his teeth. He took it out, readied it in his right hand, and shoved the Colt to his left side.

Nick reached a small landing at the top of the stairs. He paused in front of a door and gently turned the knob. It was unlocked. He eased it open and peered in. A short corridor led straight to another door. There were rooms on both sides of the corridor. Nick heard the sounds of a shower.

A man called out: "Tibor?"

From one of the lighted rooms came an answer. "What is it, Gyula? I told you I have a headache. Leave me alone."

The man in the shower laughed. "You had too much of the master's whiskey, that is your trouble. You are not going downstairs tonight, then?"

"No. I have had them all, anyway."

"You fool! A new batch just came in tonight."

"I know—I know. You can have them. I am going to try to sleep. This hangover is killing me. I wish I could die."

Killmaster grinned.

"I'm going to have one of the black girls," said the man in the shower. "Perhaps I will have them both. It will be something new to me."

"Good, Go and have them. Only, for God's sake, shut up. You can tell me about it tomorrow."

Nick went in and padded quietly down the short corridor to the lighted doorway. A man lay on a bed with his face buried in the pillow. He groaned. With no humor at all, Nick thought: One hangover cure coming up. He was going to work now and he had to protect his rear. He could afford to leave no loose ends.

A floorboard creaked as Nick stepped to the bed. The man turned his head and stared up into the black devil's face. His mouth fell open.

Nick bashed him at the nape of the neck with the hilt of his trench knife. The man grunted. Nick put a knee in the small of his back, lifted his head, then cut his throat.

From the shower, the other servant called out, "Did you say something, Tibor?"

Nick ran lightly down the hall on his toes to the bathroom, and stepped in. There was an old-fashioned tub shower with a yellow curtain. The curtain had a red goose-girl design on it. The man in the shower began to sing.

Killmaster yanked back the curtain and ended the song with one crushing hand, as he plunged the knife in deep below the ribs on the left side with the other. He let his victim slip into the quickly reddening water in the tub. Then he rinsed his knife and turned off

the shower.

From the clothing in the room, Nick took the only thing he was after—keys. There were a lot of them.

Pocketing the keys, he hurried to the door at the far end of the corridor and went into a quiet foyer. A single low-watt bulb shone dimly on an inclined ramp leading to a steel door. To his right, an iron staircase spiraled down. He walked softly to the top of the staircase and stood listening. He could see a faint light and heard female voices speaking German. The wolf in Nick smiled in anticipation. “I’ll get to you ladies in a minute!” he whispered joyfully. He went up the ramp to the steel door. It was locked, of course. It must lead into the main house, the upper section, so it probably was kept locked.

Nick went back to the spiral staircase. He went down very slowly, taking care that his feet made not the slightest audible sound on the iron treads. As he descended, the light grew stronger and the voices louder. Hearing German spoken made Nick’s teeth clench in his blackened face. Old buddies from Belsen, no doubt.

He surveyed the scene from the hall before he entered the little room. There were two Amazons, the one he had seen in the ballroom and another one who looked like her twin. Altogether, he thought, about five hundred pounds on the hoof. They were having tea with little cakes as they chattered away like monkeys. He saw their whips on a small side table.

Nick shifted the knife to his left hand, pulled the Colt from his belt, and stepped to the door. “Guten morgen, ladies. No, don’t scream!”

They did not scream. The tea cups crashed to the floor from paralyzed fat fingers as they stared at Nick without sound. And Nick knew why. These two sadistic bitches had seen far worse sights than a blood-drenched blackamoor with a gun.

Nick quietly closed the door. The Amazons did not move an inch as he slid a hand into the side pocket of his jacket and slipped on the spiked brass knucks.

He chose the one he had seen in the ballroom, who herded Pam toward the door, as his first victim. He stepped over to her with an icy smile, and said, “I beg your pardon, gracious Frdulein.” Then he slammed the knucks into her huge head. She oozed from the chair to the floor like a melting mass of lard.

Nick had to give the other old bag credit. She heaved her great bulk out of her chair and was charging him with a butcher knife.

Killmaster sidestepped and brought the blade of the trench knife down against her thick wrist. The butcher knife dropped to the floor. He smashed his big fist into the billowing stomach. The Amazon doubled over and began to vomit. Nick grabbed her by the hair and pulled her head back and put the point of the knife to her throat. He

noddod toward the other woman. "You saw what I did to that one?"

"Ja. Y-yes."

"That is nothing. I have killed two of your people already and I am ready to kill more of them—as many as I must. And I'm ready to kill you, too. You understand?"

"Yes. B-but do not kill me, bitte! I have done nothing. I am only an old lady who—"

One guess was as good as another. Nick grianed down at her evilly. "An old lady who used to work at Belsen? Who cannot go back home? Who is wanted for war crimes?"

Her face drooped.

"Where are the Blackstones?" He pressed on the knife a little.

She replied instantly. "In Budapest. They will be back soon."

"How soon?"

"I do not know. Already they are late."

"Why did they go to Budapest?"

The fat shoulders moved very slightly. "Business."

"Who else stays here besides Blackstone and his wife?"

Again the slight shrug. She was staring up at him in unblinking fear. Nick yanked on the graying hair. "Who else?" he repeated gruffly.

"Only the great lady, the movie star, Mona Manning! But she is not a guest. It is a menage a trois. You understand?"

He glared at her. "Of course, I understand. They sleep three in a bed. But never mind that. How many girls are downstairs?"

"Sixteen now. Some new ones came in just this night."

Nick removed the knife from her throat and stepped-back. Time was running short now. He stared at the Amazon and she saw something in his eyes, glinting merrcilessly in the black face, that seemed to freeze her blood. She slid from the chair to her knees and clasped her hands around his knees. "Bitte, mein herr—please! Do not—do not—"

Nick considered her for a moment. It was the noise that was worrying him. "How many others in the house now? I know about the two men upstairs. So don't lie, or I will kill you!"

She was swaying back and forth on her knees now. "No others! Only four of us tonight. I swear it. Four have always been enough—there has never been any trouble here and—"

"There's trouble tonight," Said Nick grimly. Then he shot her through the head.

Without looking at her again, he went to the other one and administered the coup de grace in the back of her head. As he left the little room and ran up the spiral staircase, he was fumbling for the keys in his pocket. Every second counted now.

He got the steel door open with the third key he tried, and moved like a ghost down a wide, thickly carpeted hall. Then he heard the clicking of a telephone dial. The sound was coming from an alcove near the front door. Nick stopped dead in his tracks; He heard a man's voice whispering: "Hurry, you fool! Put me through—put me through!"

The cameraman! Nick had forgotten about him. He moved forward on silent feet to the alcove.

The little man gasped; dropped the phone, and ran for the front door. At the same time, through a wide expanse of glass that surrounded the door area, Nick saw the flash of headlights coming up the driveway. A shot was impossible now. Nick flipped the trench knife. The man uttered a short screech that ended in a gurgle. He fell to his knees, the knife protruding from his back, and clawed frantically at the door. Nick leaped forward. There was still time. But there must be no betraying blood!

He broke the man's neck with a karate blow, then lifted the body to his shoulders, leaving the knife in the wound to decrease the flow of the blood. As he turned and ran back down the hall, the beam of headlights swept across the glass like a lighthouse beacon. This is going to be a damned close thing, Nick thought.

To his right was a pair of tall, arched double doors. He tried a knob and the doors opened into a long room. Soft lights glowed along the walls, lights that were not visible from the outside because of heavy drapes. In the middle of the room a large shiny table was set up for a conference, with pads, pencils, glasses, and a water jug. On a nearby tea cart was an assortment of bottles. A conference, tonight maybe! Nick was tempted, but precious seconds were fleeting away. He didn't want a shoot-out yet. There would be too many of them and they were bound to have armed guards ...

There was a huge fieldstone fireplace running the width of the room to Nick's right. No help there. He turned left, hoping the dead man on his shoulder was not dripping too much—thank God the carpeting was wine-colored. Then he saw it: the musician's gallery! Probably built for effect and never used. It blocked off that end of the high-ceilinged room, about fifteen feet above the floor. A narrow flight of stairs climbed one wall.

Nick Carter ran.

He was kneeling behind a partition, wiping his bloody knife on the dead man's shirt, when the door below opened and a huge ceiling chandelier flashed on. Nick peered through the fretwork. He watched five men come in. The last one said something to a couple of guards. They were big, rough-looking men with tommy guns cradled in their arms. Nick sighed. That was that. A change in tactics was called for.

The wolf was going to have to turn into a fox.

With the dispassionate gaze of one who very shortly was either going to kill or imprison all of them, he watched the group gather around the big table. It was a polyglot little gang of killers who were blathering away in Hungarian, French, German, and English. The overhead light was brilliant and Nick had an unimpeded view. He studied each man carefully as they all settled around the table.

Fang Chi was small, neat, and wiry. He was wearing a well-pressed gray suit, a white shirt, and a dark tie. His raven-black head shone as he opened a heavy briefcase and began arranging papers on the table beside him. "It's very late," he said to the table at large. "I must get back to Budapest tonight. So let's get this over with quickly."

"Stay here tonight, Fang. You know you're welcome, and there is plenty of room. I'll just ring for Tibor and—" Sybil Blackstone's invitation was ungraciously interrupted.

"I cannot! I must get back to the Legation. Now, if you please ..."

Killmaster relaxed. Tibor sure as hell wouldn't have answered that ring, unless he answered it from hell, and that would have led to complications.

"Fang is right! It is late. I have to get back to the castle and set up for tomorrow's shooting. You know how important it is—the Committee is coming. Let's get on with it!"

The last voice was deep and vibrant, with a tone of command. Nick studied the speaker with some surprise, for he was strangely dressed. Then he decided that the guy must have come straight from a masquerade ball. The man left the table to fix himself a drink at the tea cart. He was wearing a checked cap, a white scarf around his throat, a Norfolk jacket, and pink twill riding breeches tucked into high, shiny riding boots. The character looked like a 1920 movie director!

"Speaking of the Committee, Bela, I suppose everything is in order for them?"

Bela Kojak! Nick surveyed the oddly costumed man with renewed interest. So that was Kojak! He appeared to be higher tip in this unholy group than Paulus Werner had indicated.

Sybil Blackstone was an emaciated blonde with a wrinkled neck and clawlike hands. Her hair was cut short, in mannish style, and she was wearing a dark tailored suit. Nick, remembering the dead Amazon's words, smiled to himself. Menage a trois, she had said. It might be interesting, from a clinical point of view, to watch the three of them at play sometime.

Standing just below Nick now were Mona Manning and Michael Blackstone. The woman was clutching Blackstone's arm and speaking in a loud, defiant whisper.

"I'm telling you for the last time, Mike! I simply must have better parts. I'm the star, but I'm not being treated like one! My dressing room is a disgrace! I get no respect, absolutely no respect, from the little snips in the chorus. I won't stand for it any longer, Mike. I just won't. One of these days I'm going to walk off the set and never come back. You'll see!"

"Now—now, Mona! You must be patient, darling. Everything will be all right. I'll speak to C.B. tomorrow, in person. I'll get things straightened out. You go on being the regular trouser you are, honey, and keep giving me those magnificent performances. Okay?"

The voice was that of a long-suffering man. Nick could very nearly have reached out and touched Michael Blackstone. He looked like a disreputable Lincoln. He was extremely tall, very bony, with a mass of uncombed gray hair. His craggy face had a Lucifer sadness as he tried to soothe the madwoman.

Mona Manning clung to the tall director. Her voice changed abruptly from that of an angry shrew to a giggling, mindless child. "Oh, Mike, darling! You're such a doll. I knew you would help me. You always do. Oh, Mike, Mike! Do you really think my come-back is a success? Are we going to have it all again the way it used to be?"

Killmaster, peering down through the fretwork at Mona Manning, felt a tinge of genuine pity. At this range, and in this merciless lighting, America's former sweetheart was a sad sight. The mask of heavy makeup she wore could not hide the havoc that time, drugs, booze and mental illness had wrought. The only thing she had left was her figure, which was still lush and full-breasted. Nick remembered the film he had seen her in, recalling the lubricious contortions of this fortyish, still nubile body so close to him now America's sweetheart had become the slut of the world!

"Mona, Mike. Come here, please. We need your signatures." It was Sybil Blackstone. She and Fang Chi were busy with a pile of papers. Bela Kojak, in his outrageous get-up, stood aside and nursed a drink. He looked bored with it all, but Killmaster, appraising him from the gallery, knew that here was the next immediate enemy, the man with the armed guards. Here was the man who had to get to the castle—whatever and wherever that was—and set up for the next day's shooting—because the Committee was coming?

Nick listened and learned. Tonight was pay-off night, it appeared, and Fang Chi was paying off with Red Chinese gold. It was a complicated paper arrangement, beginning in Budapest and proceeding through Swiss banks to Hong Kong. Nick filed the details away in his mind for his report—if he lived to make one.

In five minutes he knew that the "castle" was where the movies were actually being shot. The Committee that was coming tomorrow

would be an official Hungarian Government subcommittee in charge of the production of educational and documentary films. Nick smiled. So that was it! The Hungarians did not know about the dirties! This outfit was also making documentaries, thus they had a perfect front for the dirties. That explained why the girls had to be so carefully hidden away and transported to and from work in the vans.

Fang Chi was stuffing papers into his briefcase. "You are positive that everything is in order at the castle, Bela? We do not want anything to go wrong now. We—my government—is most satisfied with the results so far. The films are having a tremendous propaganda impact. Especially those which feature Mona Manning. We would like many more featuring her, more films like *Shame of the Gangsters*. That was a masterpiece."

Bela Kojak tapped the shiny table with a riding crop, which he apparently had stowed in one of his boots. "I told you, Fang. Everything is in order. I am going to make a last-minute check—if I can ever get away from here—but I assure you that all is well." He chuckled. "All the—ah—more exotic sets are stored in the dungeons. The girls are safely hidden here. My men know how to keep quiet. They'd better." He struck the table with the riding crop. "What is there to worry about? The Committee will find nothing but tractors and smiling bumpkins. I am going to use some of the local peasants."

Mona Manning and Blackstone had wandered away again and were standing, glasses in hand, down by the huge fireplace. Neither of them appeared to be much interested in the business at hand.

Fang Chi said: "How many girls do we have now?"

"Nine, at last count," replied Sybil Blackstone. She turned to Bela Kojak. "We need more girls, Bela, and soon. There were the three that died, and the ones who became useless and had to be shipped out. You had better get in touch with your man Werner before long."

Kojak was at the tea cart, fixing himself a nightcap. He did not turn as he said, "I will, very soon now."

The black-faced man in the gallery was making rapid calculations. Nine girls. The Amazon had said sixteen. Six in the troupe, and Pam made seven. Seven and nine were sixteen!

Someone—and Nick was betting on Bela Kojak—had gotten the extra seven girls into the villa without telling Sybil or Fang Chi. Mike Blackstone and Mona Manning obviously didn't count

Killmaster fixed his cold gaze on the back of Bela Kojak. You're my pigeon, Kojak, he told himself softly. But how am I going to bag you?

He glanced behind him, over the body of the cameraman. There was a line of casement windows back there, set flush with the floor of the gallery and running to the ceiling. Nick set about divesting himself of the keys he had accumulated. Keys clink. Gently, with great

tenderness, he brought out each key and laid it on the floor. The trench knife he put in one side of his belt, the Colt in the other. Then, with extreme caution, he began to crawl toward the windows. If they were dummies, or locked from the outside, he was in trouble.

The gallery was twenty feet deep. When he reached the windows he could not be seen from the room below. It was noise or strong draft that could betray him. He could still hear them talking. Bela Kojak was lingering, but very impatient. Good. Nick needed only a few minutes for what he had in mind.

The windows were not dummies, and they were locked from the inside. Nick reached up and twisted the lock open, and eased out one of the windows. This was a damned ticklish job. He had studied the villa carefully earlier, and he thought he knew what lay outside the windows, but he could not be absolutely sure. Of course, there were Kojak's guards to reckon with. How many of them were there? Where were they? If there was a guard on patrol around the house, he would see the light when Nick opened the window.

Very slowly, he peered out the window. He knew a sense of relief. It was pitch-dark out there. He put his hand out and felt cold, smooth tile, steeply pitched. If he had figured it right, he should be able to slide down this bit of roof and drop into the parking lot.

Without a sound, Killmaster eased his big body through the window, an inch at a time. He went feet first, clinging to the windowsill, and pulling the window shut behind him. He searched with his feet for the gutter below, but could not find it. He released his hands from the sill and slid a heart-stopping two feet before his toes hit the gutter. The rasp of shoe leather on tile was too loud.

He lay face-down, not moving and hardly breathing. The wind swirled over him and he heard the window bang gently. Damn!

A minute passed. He heard nothing else. He must hurry now or Bela Kojak would be leaving. He let himself down to the gutter, grasped it in his steely fingers, and swung himself over. He dropped to the ground. As he had expected, he was in the parking lot, with the garage to his left, the jut of the villa's rock foundation to his right. He tiptoed in that direction.

The guard, his Tommy gun slung over a shoulder, was leaning against the side of the rock where the driveway left the tarmac. He had his arms crossed and was whistling tunelessly. Beyond him, on the gravel, stood a jeep. Between Nick and the guard was a car. It looked like a Skoda, probably Kojak's car. Problem: How to get into it and hide before the man came out. That damned guard sure created problems.

For once, the problem was solved for Nick. There was a bustle at the front of the house, then a rough voice called, "Sascha?"

The guard grunted and shambled off around the corner. Nick was running for the Skoda even before the man's heel had vanished. He twisted the handle of the back door, lifting it slowly so it would not squeak, and crept in. He closed the door softly, then pulled a heavy robe over him as he huddled on the floor. Damned nice of Kojak to provide a robe, he thought.

The ride was surprisingly short. Nick Carter, who was oriented as well as a compass, lay in the back and tracked their progress.

Left at the bottom of the driveway—that meant south, toward Budapest. The Danube to their right. Almost immediately, they left the road, this time to the right, toward the river. The track was rough and twisted and plunged downward on a steep grade. Bela Kojak had a window down and Nick could catch the river smell mixed with his cigar smoke. They couldn't go much farther or they would be on the bottom of the Danube. Kojak kept humming to himself an old American tune: "I dream of Jeannie with the light-brown hair ...". Now and again he would sing a few of the words in Hungarian. This character, Nick told himself, is a real character!

By this time Nick had a damned good idea what "castle" meant. He knew that the Danube, like the Rhine, is lined with crumbling old fortresses. Many of those on the Danube had been built by the Crusaders and—

The track straightened and became smoother. Then the car jounced over wooden planks and halted.

"... borne like a Zephyr on the summer air ..." Bela Kojak got out of the car and slammed the door. Nick waited beneath the robe, his hand on the knurled butt of the Colt. It occurred to him, in that brief moment, that in all he had heard tonight there had been no mention of dope—or of a certain Dr. Miljas Eros ...

The lights were blinding. They flooded the car with cold, white heat, stark and revealing. From somewhere outside, the voice of Bela Kojak said jovially: "You in the back seat! Come out with your hands up, at once. No tricks, please. Come out, I say. I am going to count to five—then my men will begin firing their machine guns. One ... two ..."

Killmaster had been schooled in adversity. Yet, as he climbed out of the car, hands over his head, his heart was lead in his big chest. He had failed.

Now he saw that he was in the flagstoned courtyard of an old castle. And he was ringed by a dozen heavily armed men. Bela Kojak, still in his 1920 costume, stood a dozen feet away, tapping his riding crop on a shiny boot. After a moment, he came over to peer at Nick in unabashed curiosity.

Suddenly, Kojak laughed. “Ha—ho. I see it now. The black-face business. A commando raid, no? But why? Who are you? Why did you conceal yourself in the back of my car? Who the hell are you, that you go around looking like the devil himself?” Kojak laughed again.. “You must be careful, my friend, or you will frighten my men. After all, they are only stupid peasants.”

Nick Carter stared at him, but said nothing.

Kojak continued. “It would amuse you, perhaps, to know how I knew that you were back there? I have an electronic gadget on the dashboard that tells me of such matters. Clever, no? But, I think, too bad for you.” Bela Kojak signaled with the riding crop.

One of the men hit Nick in the back of the head with the butt of a tommy gun.

Chapter 10

HIS BACK was cold. He could not move his arms or legs, and there was a blinding light in his eyes—a hot, burning light. Sweat was trickling into the hair on his chest.

Someone gave a command and the blinding white light was turned off. He recognized Bela Kojak's voice. "We must be careful with those kliegs, eh, my friend? They can blind a man."

Now Nick could open his eyes. The first thing he saw was Bela Kojak sitting in a canvas director's chair, smiling down at him. The man flicked his palm lightly with his riding crop. "Ah, you come around at last. Good. Now we can get down to business. But first, perhaps you had better observe your situation. I am afraid that it is not hopeful at the moment. It is possible, however, that your full cooperation might improve it."

Nick observed his situation. It certainly was not good. He was spread-eagled on a cold stone floor, his manacled wrists and ankles fastened to ring bolts. He was naked except for his shorts. In one quick glance he saw an array of props, cables and derricks, and wires snaking over the floor. He was on a sound stage in a movie studio. In the castle, no doubt.

Bela Kojak held up something wispy and brown. "Your moustache," he said. "We have also wiped the black off your face. You are a very good-looking man, Mr. Stranger, and you have a body like Atlas. If I liked men, which I do not, I should certainly try to get you as a lover. But enough of that. Are you ready to answer questions?"

Nick, his face impassive, said: "All I have to do is give you my name, rank, and serial number. Okay. Hector Glotz, T/5, OO1/200, Satisfied?"

Kojak slapped his boot with the riding crop and laughed heartily. "You have a sense of humor, Mr. Stranger. Good. You may need it. I hope not. I hope you are going to be sensible. I should hate to have to harm that magnificent body or that cunning, cold brain. Oh, yes, I have been in touch with the villa!"

Kojak left his chair and walked over to Nick. The AXEman could see his own reflection in the shiny boots. They had cleaned his face, all right. He stared up at Kojak, noticing for the first time that the man had a face like a frog's, with big pop eyes. Then he understood why the eyes looked so big. Kojak was wearing strong contact lenses. But they were more than mere lenses. They were false eyes that bulged. The man was in disguise! The crazy suit, the 1920 director's outfit, that must be part of it. Yet the others at the villa tonight had accepted

him without comment.

Kojak reached down and touched Nick's face with the riding crop. "I said that I have been in touch with the villa, Mr. Stranger. You have killed five people! Including two old women. My God, what a cold-blooded bastard you are, Mr. Stranger. I salute you."

There was no doubt about the admiration in Kojak's expression. He touched Nick's face with the crop again. "I am most sincere when I say that I do not want to hurt you. I want you in good condition. I can use a man like you. But you will have to cooperate. So talk!"

Nick was considering the angles. He glanced around the room again. They were alone now.

"My men are just outside," Kojak told him with a knowing smile. "They are a stupid lot of clods but they are not deaf. Will you talk?"

"Talk about what?" Killmaster's mind was racing. What was Kojak's game? Was there any chance of getting out of this trap alive?

Kojak went back to his chair. He sat down and crossed his long, booted legs. He caressed his chin with the riding crop. "You have a saying in America—oh, I know you are an American—you have a saying about something for openers? Yes? Good. Now, for openers, suppose you tell me your name?"

"All right," said Nick. "I'll talk. But you're wrong to start with—I'm British, not American." He paused, watching Kojak for the effect of his lie.

Kojak nodded. "I see. Go on."

"My name is Jacob Werner. I am a clerk and I live in London. I have a cousin, an older man, whose name is Paulus Werner. Well..." He ran through the entire story as he and Pam had rehearsed it

Bela Kojak listened quietly, without interrupting. He did not smile. The riding crop was tapped constantly against his boot.

Nick finished. "I thought that maybe Uncle Paulus was mixed up in something. All those women, you know. And he was in trouble with the police. So I took the job on, to help out my uncle, and I thought that I would just snoop around a little and see what I could find out. Maybe a little cash. Maybe something I could blackmail Uncle Paulus with when I got back to London."

"Um—I see. How did you find out about the Blackstones and their villa?"

Nick was ready for that one. "When Uncle Paulus came to see me to ask me to help him with the troupe, he gave me quite a lot of money. A piece of paper slipped out of his wallet. It was rather dark in the hallway and he didn't notice it. I kept my foot on the paper until he left. There was something written on it. Michael Blackstone, Vac, Hungary. It only took a look at the map to find that Vac was near Budapest. So I just told my wife, Pam, not to worry and I wandered up

here to see what I could find.”

Bela Kojak’ nodded, unsmiling. “And you found it necessary to kill five people? Even two women?”

“About that,” Nick said, “I suppose I might as well confess. I’m not really what I seem—I’m not a clerk in a wine shop. That’s just a front. I’m really a pretty tough guy. I’m wanted for murder at home.”

Bela Kojak got up and stretched. “That’s all?” he asked. “That’s your story?”

“It’s the truth, Mr. Kojak. I swear it.”

Kojak walked over and kicked Nick in the face as hard as he could. Then he went back and sat down again. One of Nick’s eyes was closing and he could taste blood.

Kojak laughed. “You are a pretty bad liar, Mr. Stranger,” he said wryly. He took something out of his pocket. Nick recognized his passport. Kojak flicked it with a thumb. “Genuine. Only the visa is false. A very fine job, by the way. The English girl, the one you call your wife, she had a passport of the same type—genuine, but false visa.”

Kojak leaned forward. “You are British agents?”

Nick was silent.

Kojak sighed. “No. Somehow, I don’t think so. I think you are American, my friend. Oh, your disguise was good. Professional. That makes one think, does it not? If not British agents, then maybe American agents? Or, since the girl is British, maybe American and British agents working together. But why? Why here and now? What are you after?”

Suddenly, Bela Kojak went off into peals of laughter. He bent over double in the chair in his hilarity. Nick watched impassively, hating the restraining manacles, and wanting to get his hands around that thick throat.

Finally, Kojak managed to contain himself. He wiped his eyes on his white scarf, saying, “It is really so simple, is it not? You are after the movie studio and those who operate it. The propaganda films are beginning to get under your sensitive American skins. So what do you do? You send another agent after losing that poor devil whose—ah—remains were posted to you from London.”

Killmaster closed his eyes. He did not want Kojak to see the fury in them. The man might kill him out of hand.

Finally, Nick asked, “You did that?”

“I ordered it done. I may even do the same to you—if only I knew where to send the remains.”

Nick made no comment.

After a pause, Bela Kojak said softly, “You’re AXE, aren’t you? Only AXE would send a killer like you. Only AXE has such killers!”

Nick remained silent.

Kojak kicked him in the face again. "You will talk, you know. You will babble before this is over. Because if you are AXE—and I think you are—I have a good idea who you are. And if I am right, you are worth a million dollars to me. And I am a greedy man, Mr. Carter!"

Still, Nick did not speak. His eyes were closed again.

Kojak kicked him in the face once more. Then he said, "Very well. We shall see. I have a hobby, Mr. Carter—I will keep calling you that, and maybe it will refresh your memory. My hobby is fascinating: Medieval tortures. Some of them are very ingenious and I have studied them all."

Kojak went to the door and summoned some of his men. He snapped orders, then came back to stand by Nick again. "I have the feeling, Mr. Carter, that you regard me as something of an eccentric. This costume, perhaps? A whim of mine, nothing more. But since I actually do the directing of our little art films, I rather like to play the role. Childish of me, I know. But I have always found children rather charming—and very cruel. You see, Mr. Carter, that I am talking rather a lot. I am giving you a chance to think matters over before we start the torture. I am quite honest when I say that I do not want to ruin that magnificent body."

It was then that Killmaster began to think he had a chance. Although Kojak suspected who he was, he as yet had no proof. He would try to get that proof to confirm his suspicions. Until he did he would have to keep Nick alive. The AXEman now breathed a little easier. He was going to live for a while, at least, and as long as he was alive he had a chance. Sooner or later, Kojak or his men were bound to make a slip. Nick only hoped that he would be in shape to take advantage of the break, if it came. Meantime, he must stall, use all his guile, try every angle to keep these brutes from crippling him permanently.

Four men came in, carrying a door. At least, it looked like a door, but it was without hinges or knob. Actually, it was a door-sized board an inch thick.

Kojak pointed with his riding crop. "Place it, fools! You should know how by this time."

The men put the board on top of Nick so that it covered all but his face. "Bring the first two stones now," Kojak ordered. He returned to his chair and regarded Nick coldly. "What you are about to undergo, Mr. Carter, is an old torture known as *peine forte et dure*. It translates, roughly, as 'how much pain can you bear?' At firsts it will be pressure, not pain, but in the end they will be the same. Ah, here comes the first stone now. It is a millstone, Mr. Carter. I would judge that it weighs about two hundred pounds."

Two men came in, carrying one millstone. They were sweating and straining, slipping on the rough floor as they brought the huge stone toward Nick. "Easy," warned Kojak. "We don't want to crash his chest Not yet. That will be done later, slowly and with finesse."

The men eased the stone onto the board and stepped back. Nick fought to expand his mighty chest and the Stone moved on the board. He could still breathe almost naturally. Almost.

"Bravo!" said Bela Kojak. "What a fine specimen you are, Mr. Carter! It is going to take quite a few stones, I fear. But we are well supplied. However, first, to save you needless pain and my having to listen to more lies, let me tell you what I know. It may save anguish and time."

Kojak shifted his chair nearer to Nick, and then lit a cigar. He blew fragrant blue smoke into the AXEmen's face. The stone on Nick's chest was getting heavier by the minute.

"For instance, Carter, I know that Paulus Werner is dead," continued Kojak. "Murdered by strangulation. I think you did that, Mr. Carter. His body was identified by an associate of mine, and I was informed at once, before you and your pitiful little troupe arrived in Budapest That, I will admit, was quite a coup. I had no idea you would be so bold. But at the time I had no knowledge of you. However, I was alert for trouble, Mr. Carter. Unfortunately, I was just too late to catch you. Half an hour after you left the Hotel Hungarian Ir, my men, wearing the uniforms of the Security Police, had your little troupe rounded up and in the vans."

"You're a smart son of a bitch," Nick managed to gasp out. "One of these days the regular police are going to nab you and shoot you full of holes."

Kojak lapsed into another gale of laughter. "Oh, Mr. Carter! Really! If only you knew how funny that is. I wish—I really wish—that I could tell you something. But I cannot. Let us get on with it."

More cigar smoke wafted into Nick's face. The stone was crushing him inexorably. He could still breathe, but just barely.

"The two Negro girls, they are mine run." Kojak made, a sound of contempt. "Not even as good as that. Not. as good as Werner's usual lot. But the little English girl—ah, now she is something else again. I think I will take her. for my own."

Nick was aware that Kojak was watching him closely. It was an abrupt change of tactics. Nick countered. "Take her and be damned to you! She's nothing to me."

But Kojak did not believe him. "I will take her," he went on. "First I shall amuse myself with her, then we will use her in the films, and afterward she will be shipped out to the Far East. You could save her from all that, Mr. Carter."

It was too much. The stone was pressuring his lungs now. Nick lost his temper and gasped out vile curses.

Bela Kojak raised his riding crop. "Bring another Stone," he commanded.

Killmaster managed to endure. He had to fight now for every breath, as his big ribcage burned with pain. But somehow he held on. He kept his eyes closed and fought the terrible pressure. He could hardly expand his lungs now, but by holding his mouth open and gasping rapidly he could inhale enough air to keep him alive.

"Another stone," ordered Kojak.

Kick began to despair. About six hundred pounds of dead weight on his chest was too much for any mortal man. How to stall? How to gain time? Think, damn you, think!

The sweating peasants lifted another millstone and added it to the pile on Kick's chest. He felt his ribs begin to bend. Air was forced out of him and his lungs were two burning vacuums. As the last of his air sighed out of him, he managed to gasp, "I—tell you something! T—take off—I talk!"

Kojak signaled his men to remove all but one of the stones. He hitched his chair a little closer. "Well, Mr. Carter? You are going to admit that you are Mr. Carter?"

The air on the movie lot was hot and it stank, but it was the sweetest air that Kick had ever breathed. He filled his lungs again and again, savoring it, swallowing it, as the stone rose and fell.

"Well?" Kojak's tone was sharp now:

"I'm not Carter," Kick said stubbornly. "But maybe I can tell you something that you don't know. Something you can use to your own advantage. Somebody is using your girlie setup to run dope into this country!" That somebody could be Bela Kojak, of course. But it might give him a respite.

He watched Kojak closely. For the first time, the man's aplomb seemed to be shaken. His face tightened and his eyes narrowed. He rubbed his chin with the riding crop as he stared at Kick. Finally: "How do you know that?"

Kick told him about the milk sugar concealed in the drum. "It was sugar this time," he said. "Last time it was probably heroin. Werner must have had all kinds of gimmicks for getting the stuff in. The thing is—whom was he working with? Find that out, Kojak, and you've got them! You can blackmail them and cut yourself in. Or you can turn them in to the police and get a reward, maybe. That would be the safest way, Kojak. You know that heroin means a firing squad in this country."

Nick was talking fast, desperately, playing for every second. He couldn't take those stones again. But he was running out of words.

Kojak was staring at him with narrowed eyes.

Inspiration came. It might gain him another few minutes.

“Paulus Werner mentioned a man in London—Dr. Miljas Eros. He was very mysterious about him, didn’t seem to know much. But I got the impression that this Eros is a big shot and that everybody in Hungary is afraid of him. Do you know him, Kojak? Maybe he’s behind the dope setup? Werner was working with him, without your knowing anything about it.” It was the purest moonshine. But the words were buying time. Buying life.

Bela Kojak was reacting in a peculiar manner. He did not laugh this time. He smiled as though he held some secret wisdom. And then he signaled to the men to remove the last stone from Nick’s chest. After that, he gave an order in the local dialect that Nick could not understand.

The two men left.

Kojak came over to Nick again. He traced the tip of the riding crop over the AXEmen’s sweat-drenched face. “You are really a most remarkable man, Mr. Carter. You are a killer, you are most resourceful, and you certainly know how to talk for your life. Well, for the moment, you have won that battle. I am not going to kill you. What you have really succeeded in doing is to prove to me that you are Nick Carter. I have heard the stories, the legend, and tonight I have seen it. I wonder, Mr. Carter, who will pay the most for you—the Russians or the Chinese?”

Kojak lit a cigar. The two men came back pushing a tall cabinet on wheels. They positioned the cabinet to suit Kojak and left again. Kojak indicated the cabinet. “Do you know what that is?”

Nick had been taking in all the air he could. His strength was coming back. “No, should I?”

Kojak went to the cabinet and opened a door. It was empty. “It is a magician’s cabinet. We use it occasionally in the films. Now, Mr. Carter, I am going to show you something. Oh, I know you regard me as a lunatic. No matter. This amuses me. I have a very highly developed sense of drama. Sometimes I fancy myself as a Dr. Caligari. Now, Mr. Carter, observe closely please.”

Bela Kojak stepped into the cabinet and closed the door.

Nick kept gulping air. Nutty as a fruit cake, he thought, but as long as he plays games I can breathe. He tested the manacles linking him to the ring bolts. No use. Actually, all he had gained was a few minutes’ respite, a few minutes more of life. He did not trust Kojak’s promise not to kill him.

The door of the cabinet opened and a man stepped out. Nick stared. He was a tall, slim gentleman who might have been turned out by one of the better London shops. Homburg; stiff white collar with

discreet tie; a double-breasted suit of impeccable cut; glossy hand-made shoes; fawn-colored gloves carried with a cane. And the final touch—a monocle.

The man bowed. "Allow me to introduce myself, Mr. Carter. I am Dr. Miljas Eros, second in command of the Hungarian State Security Police." Nick had not heard that voice before.

Killmaster stared, barely managing to keep his mouth from falling open. What the hell was going on?

Now, in the voice of Bela Kojak, the man continued: "I appreciate your bewilderment, Carter. It is a compliment. Yes—I am both Dr. Miljas Eros and Bela Kojak. The titular head of our Security Police is a drunk and a homosexual. He is far too busy with his vices to do any work. But he has powerful political friends and cannot be liquidated—yet. I have hopes for the future. Meantime, I do the real work, my own way. I find it most convenient to have two faces, two personas. I also have two apartments with two mistresses. Two, you might say, of everything."

"Except lives," said Nick. "You got two of those?"

Eros-Kojak took out his monocle and polished it. He walked over to Nick and prodded him with the cane. He sighed. "With your usual acuity, Mr. Carter, you have put your finger on the sore point. I do not have two lives. I have only one and I like it. I wish to preserve it. You, sir, are making that very difficult for me just now. Why, Mr. Carter? Why did you have to find out about the heroin? You have caused tremendous problems for me!"

"Tough," said Nick. "I can see your dilemma. I'm worth a million on the hoof to you—but if you sell me, you're afraid I'll talk. You're pretty high up in the scale in the local rat race. You must have plenty of enemies. One whisper about heroin and you'll be up against a wall. But still, if you kill me you're throwing away a million dollars. Like I said—tough!"

Eros-Kojak rubbed his chin. "As you put it—tough. But I do not have to make a decision tonight. And there is much still to be done. Excuse me." He ducked back into the cabinet.

Nick was going to live for a while—until Kojak-Eros made his decision. He had precious little time, but hope began to build in him. Sooner or later, somebody was going to make a mistake.

Bela Kojak came out of the cabinet. Without speaking to Nick, he went to the door and gave curt orders. Moments later, three men entered with a movie camera on a tripod. Kojak nodded toward the AXeman. "Take some footage. A lot of it. From all angles. And where is that slut, Jina?"

"With Josef, sir. This is his night." All three of the men laughed.

"Get her," commanded Kojak. "When you have finished here take

him onto the bedroom set.”

One of the men objected. “But the set has been torn down. You ordered it done.”

Kojak turned on the man savagely. “Then I order it set up again! Immediately. Now, get on with your work.”

Kojak came to kneel beside Nick Carter. He took a small metal box from his pocket and lifted out a hypodermic needle. “No need to be afraid,” he assured Nick. “This drug will not harm you. It is only to assure your cooperation.”

Killmaster called him a few filthy names. He had nothing to lose now and it made him feel better.

Kojak poised the needle.

“Aren’t you going to use alcohol?” asked Nick. “I might get blood poisoning and die.”

Kojak rammed the needle into Nick’s arm. “You are one in a million, Mr. Carter. I do hope I can find a way to avoid killing you. Now, let’s get on with the picture-taking here. These are for circulation, to see if anyone in Moscow or Peking recognizes you. I’m sure they will. Then later We will take a few blackmail pictures for our own amusement. They might come in handy some day.”

Already Nick was feeling calm and relaxed. Matters were much better. Things were looking up. He was feeling so warm and comfortable, and a bit sleepy. Good old Kojak! He was a nut, maybe, but not such a bad guy, after all.

But as euphoria began to creep over him, Killmaster began to fight back. He was going to lose control of his muscles, and most of his brain. That was inevitable. But if he could keep control of some small segment of his brain, he had a chance. He must keep part of his brain free, and only pain could do it. Nick, moved his tongue over so that it lay between the back molars. He bit down hard, and tasted blood. He must swallow the blood, show no evidence of what he was doing. But it wasn’t hurting enough yet. He must bite harder. Still harder! . Nick floated away on a soft pink cloud. He lay unmoving, a silly grin on his face, as they unfastened the manacles and helped him up some stairs and into a bedroom. There were bright lights and a camera. Kojak, good old Kojak, was giving orders. They were taking Nick to the bed. Ah, that lovely bed!

Nick shifted his raw tongue to the other side of his mouth and bit hard again. The blood nearly gagged him. But he had to keep it up. If he could cling to that one part of his brain, he would be ready when his chance came. Anyway, that wouldn’t be for a little while. Now, on the bed with him, was a woman.

Faintly, through a hellish roaring, Nick heard Kojak say something. Words that were fuzzy, wavering, but seemed to come out like: “Jina

—YOU know what do—TO HIM—nononono Jina—YOU do he do—make him DO THAT you ...”

She was such a lovely little girl, all pink and white and soft. She sure knew all the tricks. Some he had never done before—but the girl whispered to him hotly, and he did them.

Nick swallowed more blood and shifted his tongue again. It was working, he thought. He had at least a fuzzy idea of what was going on. But it was tough, God it was tough! Never had a ton of feathers weighed more on his nakedness than these tickling soft feathers—only it wasn’t feathers, it was a woman’s hair.

His motor nerves failed for a moment and Nick almost lost it. He bit savagely, as he heard Kojak shouting at the far end of a mile-long ear trumpet.

“HE almost out—Put him—JINA, DAMN YOU!”

The glaring lights went out at last. Nick was still holding on. If I had ten more minutes, he thought desperately. Ten minutes! To cut myself, walk, bang my head. Soak in ice water. Ten minutes, and I could do it.

He knew he was around the turn, or nearly so, when he could understand Bela Kojak clearly.

“Take him down to the dungeons,” the man said. “The second level. Not where we put the girls, but the maximum-security hole. Three of you: Keep those machine guns ready. You’re responsible, all three of you. And God help you if he gets away. Now take him out.”

He was still terribly weak, and had to be helped off the bed, but his brain was coming back. Fine. But his muscles weren’t back yet, and he couldn’t do much Without muscles. And a weapon! He must have a weapon! Three men. Three tommy guns. All he had was a drug-racked body.

They went down a wide flight of stairs. He heard one of the men say: “Second level! How does Kojak expect us to get him down those steps? They’re like a ladder, a hundred feet down. It’s all a sober man can do to make those stairs.”

Another man said: “Push him down and be done with it.”

“You are a fool, Mulka. The boss does not wish him dead. But we’ll manage. Two of you go ahead to catch him if he slips. I’ll ease him down by his belt.”

So he was dressed again! Nick, stumbling along between two of the men, let his fingers rub against his leg, felt the return of tactile sensation. Yes. He had his pants on.

As they approached the steep, ladderlike stairs leading down to the fetid gloom of this old crusader’s castle, Nick knew he had found his weapon. That the weapon might kill him as well made no difference—4t was all he had. It was all or nothing.

The simple shift of mathematical chance was what did it. Two of his guards went first. Otherwise, he could not have brought it off.

The two men, their tommy guns slung now, took a few cautious steps down the steep stone steps. They were cut out of solid rock and pitched at not much less than a 45-degree angle. It could be a murderous fall. Nick swallowed blood and suppressed a grim smile. Murder was just what he had in mind.

Suddenly, he let himself go utterly lax. The man behind him swore and tried to support Nick's, dead weight. He slung his tommy gun and got both hands hooked into Nick's belt, trying to ease him down a few steps.

"Goddamn bastard," said the man behind Nick. "I wish we could just pitch him down and break, his damned neck."

The stairs were narrow, only wide enough for one broad man. Nick stooped, slumped, reached back, and got the man behind him in back of the knees. He ducked forward, tossing the man over his head as he did so.

The other two men were three steps below. The falling man slammed into them. Killmaster put his head down and spread his arms and went catapulting down the treacherous stairs, taking the three of them with him.

All of us together, he thought grimly. At the bottom we'll count necks!

Chapter 11

IT WAS ONE hell of a fall! Killmaster had a little the better of it because he knew what was happening, and he tried to shield himself with the bodies of the others. Still, it was rough. After the first fifty feet, none of the men made a sound. Nick managed to protect his head but he lost a lot of skin and broke his left wrist. He heard it snap just before they got to the bottom.

The temptation to lie there for just a few seconds was overwhelming, but Nick fought it off. It was go-go now, or everything was lost. He had, for this fleeting moment, surprise on his side and he must make the most of it. And he was now reduced to one good hand!

He pushed himself off the floor with the good hand. Two of the men were out cold, dead or unconscious, but the third was moaning and trying to get up. Nick took one of the tommy guns by the barrel. He swung it like a mace and bashed out the man's brains. He went to the other two, rolled them over onto their faces with his foot, and broke their necks with the butt of the gun. He wanted no one coming in behind him.

In a way, the terrible fall had been an asset. It had speeded his recovery from the drug. He was functioning at close to normal again. He heard water running and found a little underground stream rushing through a bricked trough. Using a minute that he could ill afford, he lay in the trough, full-length, letting the icy water flow over him. One minute! He counted to sixty, gulping water, then forced himself to roll out. An hour of it would have been nice.

His left wrist useless, he loosened his belt and tucked the hand into it. At least, it would be out of the way. He took the spare clips off the bodies and put them in his pockets. They had given him back his suit jacket and that helped. He slung two of the tommy guns over his shoulders, crossing them behind and under each arm, then started back up the stairs. By cradling the third gun in the crook of his elbow, and balancing it properly, he could handle it very well.

When he reached the top of the stairs, at the second level, he saw a light and heard giggles and groans. There was no mistaking the type of groans. To his right, there was a line of cells. A faint light was coming from one. So were the groans.

Nick cat-footed it across the flagstones and peered into the cell. One of the guards was with the girl Gina, and going hell-bent for victory. Nick went quietly into the cell, and knocked out the man's brains. He shut off the girl's scream with his big hand. He did not want to kill this poor slut who didn't know the score. She was no

Amazon from Belsen. So he terrified her. He put his bleeding, cut, grime-caked face close to hers and whispered: "I'm going to let you live, girl! I'll lock you in. One sound, one tiny little sound, and I'll come back and cut your throat from ear to ear. Understand?"

All the poor creature could do was nod. Only God could deliver her from this demon thing that stood dripping water and blood and carried three machine guns slung around him like pistols.

Nick locked her in and went up the wide stairs to the first level. He was ready for anything now, but he found do one. There was not a sonnd except the hum of an electric generator. Had Kojak left? Gone back to the villa, perhaps, to report on his find? Nick doubted that. He had an idea that Kojak was playing as much of a double game with the Blackstones as he was with everything and everybody else.

He went silently down a long corridor with a concrete floor. The lights flickered, sallow and uncertain, as the generator wavered and picked up again. To his right and left he could make out sets and sound stages. This was a pretty big setup. They must have torn away everything but the shell of the old castle and started from scratch.

He came to a set that was obviously ready for shooting. There were tractors and other farm machines on turntables, a small screen and a blackboard. Kojak had been telling the truth—he was ready for the Committee, with all the nasty sex sets hidden away.

The silence was beginning to get on Nick's nerves. Killmaster had been through a lot of hell and he was goddamned mad. He hurt all over and he wanted to get things finished. He crossed the set with the tractors and came to another corridor that smelled of paint and acetone.

At the same time, Nick heard a faint sound somewhere in the building. He couldn't identify it. Someone had kicked something, closed a door too hard, banged metal against metal. The point was, and Nick grinned, it had been a stealthy sound. He was being stalked.

Nick followed his nose and turned up treasure. He found the paint room. Next to it was a room with metal cabinets on which were stacked cans of film, possibly a hundred cans. Nick set about spilling the film around the room, trailing it every which way until it looked as if some great beast had been gutted. With the ends of the film in his hand he ducked out the door and back into the paint room. As he did so a red eye winked from the dark end of the corridor and a slug bounced off the wall near him.

"Have fun, you son of a bitch," said Nick. He let go a hail of lead down the corridor. Just to keep him honest for a time. He thought it was Kojak, a puzzled Kojak, who didn't yet know just what had gone wrong. The man was probably not a coward. Nick liked that.

He began spilling paint around the floor of the room. He planted

the ends of the film in the paint like fuses. He ran to the door and let another fusillade go down the corridor. Then he ran back to the room's single window and kicked out the shutter. He straddled the sill and peered down.

Below was only a deep, dark well. Nick hated dropping into the unknown, but he would have to. In the distance, he could see the moving sheen of the Danube. There were no stars and the night was black, yet, he knew that dawn could not be more than two hours away.

He had left a large tin of paint thinner standing in the puddle of paint. He let go with the tommy gun now, letting it rave into the tin and around the room. The paint began to burn. The film caught with a swoosh and fire began to run out of the room. Nick dropped off the window.

He fell about ten feet into soft mud. He had dropped from the outer shell of the castle to the river bank. Immediately, he was up and running, the tommy guns clanging and bouncing and cutting him. He was remembering the bridge over which they had passed on the way in, and hoping it was the only way in or out, because if Kojak had a back burrow he could just forget it. He would never get the bastard.

Nick followed the mossy castle wall around to the smooth strip of road. There, to his right, was the bridge. In the old days it would have been a drawbridge, now it was just a span of planks across a deep, dry moat. Beyond it was the courtyard in which he had been taken. Already the rough stones of the court were beginning to pick up color from the fire. He heard a thunderous explosion as a barrel of something blew up. The fire was going to be a dilly.

Still, except for the crackle of flames and the explosions, there was the same eerie silence. Nick began to realize what had happened. He had gotten them all except Kojak. Either that, or some of the men had left to go to their own homes.

Nick did not cross the bridge. Instead, he jammed his heels into the bank and slid down into the moat. Then he went up the other side, laboring, and cursing his broken wrist. On the lip of the moat, he flopped down, the three tommy guns at his right hand, and waited. The courtyard was well lit by the flames now and he could see the Skoda and the jeep. He hoped that Kojak would take the Skoda. He wanted the jeep for himself and he didn't want to have to shoot it up.

He started to count. Three minutes after he started, Kojak came running out of the flaming inner building. He ran in a zig-zag crouch, a long pistol in his hand. He ran for the Skoda. Nick nodded in approval.

The engine of the Skoda roared. Tires screamed as Kojak wrenched the car around and headed for the gate. He had not turned on the

lights.

Killmaster moved into the middle of the road and let the tommy gun yammer at the approaching car. The tommy gun bucked and jumped and tried to climb. He yanked his bad arm out of the belt and laid it across the muzzle of the blazing gun to steady it. He put the whole clip into the windshield. At the last possible moment, he dropped the gun and dove to one side, rolling down the bank of the moat.

The Skoda missed the bridge and went rolling into the moat. It hit the far bank of the moat, bounced back, turned over again, and began to burn. Nick climbed out of the moat again, picked up one of the guns, and emptied another clip into the blazing car. Then he ran for the jeep, carrying the remaining tommy gun in his good hand.

He was climbing into the jeep when he remembered the girl.

"Damn!" He turned and ran back into the castle. It was an inferno now, but the flames were still largely confined to the sets and sound stages. Nick dragged the screaming, hysterical girl back into the courtyard and gave her a push toward the gate. "Take off."

He had a tommy gun on the seat beside him as he gunned the jeep toward the villa. When he reached the metalled road, he glanced back. The sky over the castle was lurid. The fire was going to attract attention, and soon. It was high time for Pam and him to be cutting out. He had done his job. Just then he smelled something burning. He glanced down to see his trousers flaming near the knee. He had to halt the jeep for a moment to beat out the fire with his good hand.

The headlights of the jeep picked them up as they ran across the road ahead of him. Michael Blackstone and his wife, and Mona Manning. Nick jammed on the brakes, steering the jeep with his knees for a moment, and fired a burst over their heads. The three halted, spun around, staring with faces ghastly white in the headlights. All were fully dressed. Mona Manning carried a large purse. Sybil Blackstone was carrying an overnight case. The loot, thought Nick. He legged it out of the jeep, careful to keep the lights on the three. He trained the tommy gun on them as he approached.

Nick spoke to Blackstone. "I'll do the talking. You listen and answer. You women keep quiet."

Michael Blackstone did not seem afraid. His seamed face was expressionless as he said, "Who the devil are you?"

"I said keep still. Turn around." He patted Blackstone up and down. The man was not armed. Nick glanced at the women. Mona Manning was wearing a long mink coat. Sybil Blackstone was wearing slacks and a heavy jacket. They could be carrying anything but he had to risk it Time was running out

"Where are the girls you had locked up?" He snapped the question

at Blackstone.

"Still locked up. We thought it best The police will find them. Obviously we can't take them with us in the cruiser." Blackstone pointed to where the cabin cruiser floated in the Danube.

"How many knots will that thing do?" Nick glanced at the sky over the castle. It was glowing hell-red now. Someone was bound to start nosing around soon.

"Thirty knots," the movie director said. "She's supercharged."

Nick pointed the tommy gun at the three. "Okay. Now, hear me well. All three of you turn and start trotting up that driveway. I'll herd you in the jeep. When we get to the house I want you"—he waved the tommy gun at Sybil Blackstone—"I want you to go in and release all those girls. Bring the English girl to me. Her name is Pamela Martin. And she had better be in good shape!"

"She may still be drugged," the woman said. "We do it to keep them quiet. The stuff is harmless."

"I'm not," said Nick. "Let's go. On the double!"

Mona Manning had said nothing all this while. Now she gave Nick a regal look of disgust and turned to Blackstone. "Who is this oaf, Mike? I won't have him as a leading man, I'll tell you that"

Blackstone took her aim. "Come on, Mona, darling. We'll do as he says. It's just sort of a rehearsal."

Nick rode herd on them up the steep driveway, the tommy gun on the seat beside him. He kept Blackstone and Mona Manning with him on the parking tarmac while Sybil ran into the house. He was taking a chance and he knew it. One thing he didn't have to worry about—she wasn't going to call the police!

But the woman was back almost immediately with Pam. When the girl saw Nick, she hesitated, frightened by his appearance.

"It's all right, baby," said Nick. "Under all this crud there beats a heart of gold."

"Nick! Nick! Oh, my God—Nick!" She ran into his arms. She was crying. She did not appear to be drugged and was wearing only a cheap pair of cotton pajamas.

Nick waved the tommy gun at Mona Manning. "Give her your coat."

"I will not! Mike, this creature—" She gathered the mink about her.

Nick yanked the coat off her and tossed it to Pam. "There, honey. Now, pull yourself together and listen. We're not out of this yet, but we've got a chance. All of you listen. I'm going to take that cruiser up the river and try to get into Austria. You can come or stay as you choose. It doesn't make a damn to me. But we go now!" He motioned to Pam. "Into the jeep."

Mona Manning had been wearing nothing under the mink but a bra, girdle and stockings. She clutched her breasts and whimpered, "I'm cold."

Nick wheeled on Michael Blackstone. "Well? Coming or staying?"

"Coming," said Blackstone. He slipped out of his corduroy jacket and wrapped it around Mona Manning. "I'll take care of her. She's coming, too."

"You're a fool!" spat Sybil Blackstone. "They'll crucify you, Michael, if they ever get you back in the States. Wasn't once enough?"

Nick pushed Blackstone and Mona Manning toward the jeep. "That's all the time we have for chatter. Get in!"

Sybil Blackstone put her hands on her hips. "I'm staying!"

"Best of luck," said Nick. "Remember me to the Secret Police." He wheeled the jeep down the driveway at a breakneck pace. There was an intolerable tightness in his chest and he knew what it meant. He had reached a point where seconds made the difference.

It was close. As the cruiser gunned away from the dock in a swirl of white water, Nick saw two cars race up and stop at the driveway entrance. A dozen red eyes winked in the gloom. The bastards were firing at them without really knowing why.

"Trigger-happy bastards," he said. Michael Blackstone, at the wheel, laughed harshly and without mirth. "They'll radio ahead, you know. We'll never make it into Austria."

"We can try."

Blackstone turned to look at Nick for a moment^ his craggy face brooding in the feeble light of the binnacle. "Who are you, man? You come into our lives like a hurricane, you undo the work of years, and now you're going to get us all killed. Are you a man at all? Or a natural element? Or perhaps the devil?"

"I'm a United States agent," Nick told him. "And you're hamming it up even now. So, as the lady told her husband, shut up and drive!"

Nick went to the companionway and shouted. "Pam?"

She appeared in the dark oblong of the door. They were running without lights.

"Yes, Nick?"

"You all right?"

She made a sound that was between a sob and a giggle. "I'll never be all right again. Never! D-do you think we're going to make it, Nick, darling?"

"We'll make it," said Killmaster with a conviction he was far from feeling. "How's our famous movie star?"

"Sitting in a corner of the cabin, staring at the floor. I put a blanket around her. She thinks I'm her hairdresser or something."

"Okay. Keep an eye on her. She's insane, but she could be

dangerous. Keep your fingers crossed, honey, and if you know how to pray you might try it.”

He took the wheel from Blackstone to get the feel of it. The big cruiser was howling up the river, her massive engines all-out. So far, they had encountered no traffic except a long string of barges well to port.

“You five around here,” said Nick. “How long before dawn?”

“Less than an hour.”

“How long to get to the border, at this speed?”

“About the same time.”

The Tommy gun was rubbing him and Nick shifted it around to the small of his back, “It’s going to be close.”

“We won’t make it,” Blackstone said. “You don’t know what you’re getting in to, Mr.—whoever you are. Let me tell you: There are picket and patrol boats all over the place. The patrol boats are armed with 50-mm cannon. They’ll blow the Mona out of the water in a minute.”

“Maybe, maybe not. They could miss.”

“They won’t miss. They’ll be warned, and anyway no traffic is permitted on this stretch of the river at night. The minute they hear us or see us they’ll be after us. Even if they don’t get us, there are still the barriers.”

Nick fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette, knowing damned well he didn’t have any. He did find Jacob Werner’s pipe and flung it over the side with fervor. He detested pipes. He turned to Blackstone, looming like an elongated pillar in the gloom of the little cabin. “You got a decent cigarette?”

Blackstone gave him a cigarette and lit it for him. Nick puffed with deep satisfaction. “Now tell me about those barriers.”

“Three layers of them, strung all the way across the river. Cable and steel netting. They are raised and lowered at certain hours to let traffic flow, but only traffic that has been cleared. They’ll be up now, of course. It’s impossible to get through them.”

They were rounding a wide bend in the river, the engines snarling like demons. Nick was keeping her as close in as he dared. “Any shoals around here? Sandbars?” If they got hung-up, it would be all over for sure.

“Not that I know of. But I’m no expert on this river. I’m not a pilot.”

They got around the bend. Nick kept her in close and let her walk on the water. He cocked an eye to the east. Was that a faint line of pearl beginning to show?

At his side, Blackstone said: “It’s a straight run now. About twenty miles. We’ll just about arrive with the dawn.” He laughed. There was a hint of genuine amusement in the sound.

"You think that's funny?" Nick was dour.

"Not really." But the man laughed again. "I was just thinking that I have about changed my mind about going back. Sybil was right. I don't think I could stand it. I suppose they'll try me for treason?"

Nick shrugged. "Not my department. But you sure picked a hell of a time to change your mind!"

"Yes. At least, I'm consistent. I've ruined my whole life that way."

"Before you start feeling sorry for yourself, Blackstone, tell me about the shore installations. Wire, I suppose. Towers?"

"So I understand. I really don't know—I've never tried to get out. But I hear the wire comes right down to the water's edge. And there are underwater obstacles to keep you from going around."

"That," said Killmaster, "is going to be real nice and cozy."

After a moment of silence, Blackstone said, "Do you mind if I go down to Mona? I'm no good to you here. Mona needs me, poor darling."

"Go ahead, and send Pam up. But don't try any monkey business."

"What could I possibly try?" asked Michael Blackstone as he left the cabin.

Upon brief reflection, Nick had to admit the man was right. They were, quite literally, all in the same boat together—sink or swim.

Pam came into the deckhouse. She clung to his arm, her head on his shoulder. She was trembling. In an effort to buck her up, Nick said: "If we get out of this, I'll let you keep that fur coat. Mink like that costs a fortune."

She kissed his cheek. "God, but you smell terrible! And I love you so! Just get us out of this, darling! Please, please get us out of this. I'll spend the rest of my life making love to you."

"I may hold you to that," he said. "And—"

They heard the shot from below. Pam clutched at his arm. "My God—"

Another shot. Nick said, "Go down and see, but be careful."

Mona Manning, he thought, must have had the gun in that big purse of hers. Probably, Blackstone had put it there, and Mona hadn't even known what she was carrying.

Pam came back. "Both dead," she told him. Her voice was tight, but steady. "I—I think he shot her first, then himself."

Nick nodded. "He told me he had changed his mind about going back. It's better for them—it would have been prison for him and an asylum for her."

From a corner of his eye he saw the patrol boat coming up on their port stern. It was still dark but he could see the white glitter of the bow wave she was throwing up.

"We've got company," he told Pam. "Look around and find a line,

any sort of line. Hurry!"

"A line?"

"A rope, damn it! Hurry up!"

He did not think the patrol boat would waste time on the formality of a shot over his bow. She didn't. The first shell took the Mona low and aft. The big cruiser lurched. Immediately, she began to lose speed. Nick thought he could see the first barrier ahead now.

Pam came back with a coil of half-inch line. "This is all I could find."

"That's good. Take the knife out of my belt and—"

A shell went through the little cabin without exploding. Pam clung to him. "Oh—oh—"

"Hang on to your nerve," Nick said savagely. "Cut enough of that line to lash us together, separately. A loop around you, leave about six feet, then a loop around me. Take my left arm and put the hand in my pocket, then loop it in tight."

He was bearing to starboard now, angling for the shore just where the first barrier ended. Where the shore line of wire began. If they had any chance at all it was there.

The girl was working fast. Her hands were steady as she followed his instructions.

A long white beam of light pinned them like an insect on a board. "Take the wheel a minute," Nick commanded. "Hold her steady as she is."

He slipped the sling of the tommy gun over his head, steadied the gun on a railing and let go with a long burst at the search light, firing high and calculating the trajectory. The light went out. A second later, two more beams were on the Mona, converging from, different angles.

"Hell!" said Killmaster. He fired the clip away, then let the gun fall overboard. He took the wheel from Pam. "Take everything out of my pockets and toss it overboard. That coat, too. Sorry. If I live long enough, I'll buy you another one."

She did as he instructed. He slipped out of his jacket and she threw it overboard. Another shell took them in the stern. The Mona was rushing at the barrier now. Not more than five hundred yards away, Nick thought.

Four or five shells got them at once. One knocked out the engines and two blasted the Mona well below the water line. Another shell blew half the wheelhouse away. The Mona heeled over and began to sink.

Killmaster grabbed the girl. "Stay under as long as you can! Follow me—I'll be pulling you along."

As they went over the side, it occurred to him that he didn't even know if she could swim.

The Danube was cold and murky and a dirty, dark brown. Nick went down deep, swimming strongly. Pam was a drag from the first moment. She could not keep up with him. He had not told her—there had been no time, and in any case he would have spared her—that he could stay under water for over four minutes and she would have to do the same. The poor kid was just going to have to drown a little. Maybe he could bring her back.

The first barrier was easy enough. There was clearance at the bottom and Nick swept under it like a fish. But Pam was already dragging, fighting and thrashing to get to the surface. She was out of air already and instinct had taken over. Nick swam grimly on, pulling the flailing girl behind him.

The second barrier was nearly flush with the bed of the river. Nick dug frantically, sending whorls of mud up around them. She was a dead weight on the line now. When he was through, he had to go back, turning on the short line, groping in the darkness, and pull her inert body through the trench in the mud. Just as well that she was out now. He could handle her more easily.

He had to raise the third barrier by main strength. He figured three minutes now. His lungs were beginning to hurt. His strength was going. Somehow he tugged up the wire cable enough to roll under and pull the girl through. His air was going. A knife began to bite at his lungs.

But they were nearly through. They might make it yet. Just half a min—

He was pulled up short. Pam was stuck on something. Nick was beginning to suffer. Agony swept through him. He turned and groped back again, encountered her limp, pajama-clad body. She was caught on barbed wire, wire that was coiled around an angle-iron projection. Frantically, he clawed at the wire. No good. She was stuck. They were stuck. He tore at the barbed wire with his good hand, ripping the flesh to bits, tearing and pulling and tugging.

She came loose. His lungs were one great blaze of pain. He headed for the surface, feeling himself going into blackness, into death. One more stroke—one more—one more—don't breathe yet—don't breathe yet—keep going keep going ...

Killmaster couldn't have been out for more than a few seconds. He found that by turning his head he could breathe. He was lying in mud covered by not more than an inch of water. It was dark, very dark, and he realized that he was in a small bight, or scallop, in the river bank. Trees hung overhead, shielding the dawn. Nick moved and touched the cold body of the girl.

Her pajama jacket had been ripped away on the barbed wire. He put one ear under a cold, firm breast and listened. Nothing. Groaning,

he turned her over in the mud, holding her face out of the water with his good hand, and climbed astride her. He let his knees sink into her body under the ribs. Up and down—Up and down ...

Pam moved, twitched. She made a gagging sound. Nick turned her over on her back and, still holding her head out of the water with one hand, began to breathe into her mouth.

Something moved on the bank, under the trees. A hot blaze of white light flowed over them. Killmaster thought: So we lose! They've got us! To hell with it. He had done everything a man could do. He was at the end of his string. He kept breathing into Pam's mouth and waiting for the harsh command or perhaps for the bullet that was marked Carter ...

"Welcome to Austria," said a friendly voice.

Chapter 12

THEY TRIED to keep Nick in an AXE hospital for a week. He raised so much hell that they let him go after two days. With his left wrist in a cast he went to see Hawk.

The old man was glad to see him alive and said so. He did not beam—Hawk never beamed—but he was obviously very pleased with his Number One boy. He began by asking if Nick wanted Hawk's autograph on his cast. When Killmaster indicated that he could live without that honor, the old man actually laughed.

"You did a fine job," he said. "A bang-up job. A clean sweep, from all reports. I think you deserve a good long leave, say a month?"

"You're too generous, sir." Nick was cold. "I've still got two weeks coming from my last leave—the one you pulled me off for this mission. Remember?"

Hawk ripped cellophane from his cigar. "Hm—so you have. I had forgotten. Take six weeks then, boy. You've earned them."

At Hawk's request, Nick made a full oral report. Hawk: listened without interruption, then picked up a flimsy from his desk. "That clears up the matter about the stuff in the drum—the little packets. When our technicians put the weapons in the drum, in Gibraltar, they found the stuff. They didn't touch it, left it strictly alone, but I've got a report here that you're probably smuggling dope as a sideline. The Mediterranean area officer filed it in quintuplicate."

Nick shrugged. "With my reputation who can blame him. Give a dog a bad name, you know..."

Hawk smiled around his unlit cigar. "You've got a bad name in Hungary, son. That is for sure. And it will be unhealthy country for you for some time to come."

"It wasn't exactly a health resort this time," said Nick acidly.

"Your Bela Kojak didn't die right away, you know. To my best information he died in a hospital. Died muttering something about AXE."

"Back to the old range," said Nick gloomily. "I can't shoot any more. Let's face it."

"There has been some vague hell raised in the United Nations," Hawk went on. "The usual thing—outrage at the way U.S. agents operate on the People's sacred soil, stuff like that. It won't come to anything."

"I hope not," muttered Killmaster. "I'd hate to be extradited."

Hawk rustled his papers. "Actually, though of course they can't admit it, I think the Hungarian government is grateful. That's all very

sub rosa, naturally.”

After a time Nick got up to leave. Hawk waited until he was at the door before he said: “What about the English girl? Pamela Martin?”

Nick lit his gold-tipped cigarette. “What about her, sir?”

“Well, she’s still in the hospital, damn it! Aren’t you even going to see her? She’s in love with you. According to my reports, our nurses are giving her a preliminary screening, and she talks about you all the time.”

“No,” said Nick. “I don’t think I had better see her. Certainly not, if she’s in love with me. The mission is over, in any case. Give her a job, sir. She’s a good, brave girl. She’ll make an excellent operative in certain capacities. Is that all, sir?”

“That’s all,” said Hawk. “Enjoy your leave.”

“I will, if I get it,” said Nick pointedly. He left.

He called Pok from the airport to inform him that the master would be home shortly. The master wanted a meal, a bottle of Scotch, and bed, lots of bed. Days of bed. And privacy. Pok said, “Yis, sar!”

The Jag XK-E was parked before the apartment. Nick went up to the penthouse in a growing rage.

Pok met him in the foyer. He spread his hands in apology. “I so sorry, sar! Just after you call Missy Vorhis come. Force way in. I no can stop.”

“She must have the goddamned phone tapped,” fumed Nick. “Where is she?”

Pok raised his shoulders. “In study, sar. Where else? I take her bottle.”

Nick Carter brushed past Pok and headed for the study. This time he was really going to toss her out on her lovely little bottom!

Or was he?